

Speaker 1 ([00:00](#)):

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Speaker 2 ([00:23](#)):

Thank you all for joining Courageous Conversation. We're excited to launch our series on programming focused on Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois. His legacy and his relevance today with a presentation in a round table format, our speakers will tell you some powerful stories that offer us some insight into Dr. Dubois, as well as a brief survey of his long life that trace the midsection of our US history. Our group will then touch upon a few key topics that will come up in future portions of this mini series. Our panelists are Arthur McFarlane, the second great-grandson of W.E.B. Du Bois, Dr. Whitney Battle-Baptiste, the director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Center and Professor, Department of Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, her colleague Adam Holmes, Assistant director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Center at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. My colleague and friend, David Dykeman, co-managing shareholder of Greenberg Traurig Boston office and co-chair of GT's Global Life Sciences and Medical Technology Group. Another colleague and friend, Mistie Weishaar, GT Marketing Manager who'll serve as a moderator. And another colleague Alex Longoria, our GT Diversity Equity and Inclusion Coordinator. So now I'll turn it over to David.

David Dykeman ([01:57](#)):

We're grateful that you can join us on this journey in this courageous conversation to learn more about a historical giant whose teachings remain as relevant today as they did 60 years now after his death. They're equally relevant as during his 95 year lifetime. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois has a lot of adjectives to describe him. American sociologist, historian, civil rights activist, Pan Africanist, author and editor. But for me as a co-managing shareholder of Greenberg Traurig's Boston office, the one that I'm most proud of is that he was born in Massachusetts and we're thrilled that his papers are housed at the University of Massachusetts and that's why this program is so important to me and the entire Boston office and our firm as a whole.

([02:51](#)):

But he was a proud son of Massachusetts. He was the first African American to earn a PhD from Harvard University and he went on to found the NAACP in 1909. Those are just a few of his major highlights, but each decade of his life has its own highlights. W.E.B. Du Bois is an icon, but it's also very personal to me and I'm excited to share his life as we learn together from some family members and scholars who are much more experts than I am. But Dr. Du Bois' personal to me for many reasons. I spend a lot of time in Great Barrington. Great Barrington is in the heart of the Berkshires in Western Massachusetts, halfway between New York and Boston. My family goes skiing at Butternut Mountain in Great Barrington, and we've been going there for many years and one of the first times we drove in, there's a sign right when you get to Great Barrington, you can see it on the right hand side there, it says birthplace of W.E.B. Du Bois.

([03:56](#)):

And to be honest, I didn't know as much as I should have about Dr. Dubois when my children first asked me about this. And I think that's one of the beauties of this event, is Dr. Du Bois' a true giant in American history, in civil rights and really across the global stage. And we're going to learn more about him today as I have over the last decade. And our flagship university, UMass Amherst is also very involved in Dr. Du

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Bois with the W.E.B. Du Bois Library, which was named in 1994 after a very popular movement on campus. And in 2009, the W.E.B. Du Bois Center at the UMass Amherst campus was established to engage audiences in discussion in scholarship, of global issues involving race, labor, and social justice, things that are very near and dear to Dr. Du Bois's heart.

[\(04:53\)](#):

And it's also home to the W.E.B. Du Bois papers, which are housed on the 25th floor of the W.E.B. Du Bois Library in the special collection archives. Those archives are free of you digitally and we encourage you all to do that after this program. UMass also owns W.E.B. Du Bois Boyhood Home Site in Great Barrington Mass. And I think one of the things that I'm proud of as well is in 2020 in Great Barrington, they renamed the regional middle school, the W.E.B. Du Bois Regional Middle School. And if you think about when this happened just over a year ago in September of 2020, right after the Black Lives Movement took hold, it was very fitting.

[\(05:39\)](#):

But I think as an aside here, we need to thank one of the friends of GT and the friends of the W.E.B. Du Bois Center, Luis Barros of LBV Ventures. He's the person who is a great friend of the firm and also a friend of the center and connected us to make this program possible. So thank you Luis. Dr. Du Bois, his lifespan 95 years and each decade, it was almost like he reinvented himself and his life really marched across the history of America and really the history of the world. And I want to hear from my colleague Alex Longoria, to share some thoughts initially about Dr. Du Bois.

Alex Longoria [\(06:20\)](#):

He was a giant of history and I can't emphasize just how much he was even despite him standing, I want to say at 5'6, which at the time was still a little bit below average, but a giant nonetheless. Popular historians and educators have largely ignored Dr. Du Bois and his place in us and world history. But thanks to generations of intellectuals, vast majority of them black, we can now see Du Bois' influence throughout American society. As often happens with history, the past resurfaces and we are afforded the privilege of getting a glimpse into that previously untold history for the first time. And as David mentioned, as we dive into Du Bois' life, which paralleled in evolving America, I think you'll see that change in evolution will be key themes throughout this program. And now I'd like all you to hear from my colleague Mistie Hague Weishaar.

Mistie Hague Weishaar [\(07:20\)](#):

Good day, everybody. The name W.E.B. Du Bois is not, if not already should be tied to everyone's mind, to the Civil Rights movement, but perhaps lesser known to many is his stance that artistic expression played an important part of his political strategy. He saw it as a way to reinforce the public image of African Americans as both citizens and individuals, and a way to combat the rampant stereotypes of his time, like the use of black face and the release of Birth of a Nation.

[\(07:52\)](#):

As a fine art and art history major, this resonates deeply with me. I spent my high school years hiding out in the library reading poetry or in art class. And some of my favorite moments were with my father at the art supply store, buying paints and brushes and canvases. Art was a very important part of my self-exploration and self-expression, and it still is. Art can transform people. I know as young artists, I sought out art by and about women and people of color because I wanted to see myself reflected there. The Harlem Renaissance was an influence on me during this time, a movement that the Du Bois helped influence.

[\(08:33\)](#):

I think these influences are equally important in the youth of today, not just in art, but in careers and profession and leaderships as well. The Du Bois belief that all art is propaganda can be seen as the precursor of today's mantra, representation matters. Du Bois himself, a prolific writer, listed artistic development alongside the fight for political and civil rights and as a way to fight prejudice with direct knowledge. As you learn more about Du Bois from our panel of speakers, we hope you will take away from this program just how relevant and varied his work was during his lifetime and how relevant it still is today. Now, I'll turn it over to my colleague David, to get our conversation started.

David Dykeman [\(09:19\)](#):

Thank you Mistie and Alex for your insights. And we look forward to you guys moderating the discussion in a little bit. But we'd start with answering the first question, who is W.E.B. Du Bois? And I'll give a little breakdown of some of the facts and figures of his life. And then we're going to turn it over to hear from his great-grandson about who was he really as a person and a man and a family man.

[\(09:44\)](#):

Born in 1868 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, W.E.B. Du Bois was one of the greatest minds our country has ever produced. He lived to be 95 years old, and his life really marches across American history if you think what happened between 1868 and a hundred years later, the way the country changed is almost unimaginable. He lived to be 95 years old, and his life really marches across history. And in each of his 10 decades, he had major accomplishments. And looking back on the timeline and the arc of his life, it almost seems as in each decade, he reinvented himself and had a theme.

[\(10:28\)](#):

He died on August 28th, 1963. Ironically, it was on the eve of the 200,000 person march on Washington for jobs and freedom, which culminated with Martin Luther King Jr's, I Have a Dream speech. And unfortunately, he died one year before the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. But some of the major highlights on his life first started before the turn of the century. In 1895, he was the first African American to earn a PhD degree from Harvard. He had his PhD in philosophy. His dissertation was about the suppression of the American slave trade in the United States between 1638 and 1871.

[\(11:14\)](#):

While he did graduate from Harvard, the university did not make it easy for him. Harvard didn't recognize his degree from Fisk University so he started from scratch and ended up receiving three degrees from Harvard; a bachelor's, a master's, and ultimately the first PhD to an African American from Harvard. The word that described his years at Harvard was tenacious. After Harvard, he went along, continued his authorship. He wrote many important books, which are still very relevant. And then in 1909, he did the thing that he may be best known for. He was one of founders of the NAACP at the very young age of 35. So this phase of his life can be described as precocious. He was well ahead of his time.

[\(12:04\)](#):

And in the later stage of his life, he was truly a global citizen. While he's from Massachusetts and we're very proud that this was his home, he truly belongs to the entire world. And his influences can be seen in Europe, China, the Soviet Union, and certainly Africa, where he spent the last years of his life. And the word that can describe this area of his life is visionary. So you look at his life and you see three words that I think helped define Dr. Du Bois; tenacious, precocious, and a true visionary. So, that's my thoughts on Dr. Du Bois and now we're happy to help share more about him with you. And we're going to start

with Arthur. Tell us about your great-grandfather, tell us something that we wouldn't see in the textbooks, and tell us how you knew him.

Arthur McFarlane ([12:52](#)):

Thank you, David. I appreciate that. And thank you to Nikki and Mistie and Alex for their thoughts on grandpa. You'll have to excuse me, I take a shortcut, I go from calling him my great-grandfather to my grandpa, mostly just because of that relationship that you talked about. I really connected with my grandfather when I was in high school. Before that, I knew about him and I had some really interesting stories that I was getting from my mother about him and a little from my grandmother about him, but it wasn't until I really started to investigate Du Bois on my own that I started to become enamored, I guess is the only way that I can put it. Really enamored with his life, the things that he had said, the things that he was talking about, and the person that he was. And it wasn't until I got into graduate school that I really realized how enamored with me he was.

([13:57](#)):

And so I think we had sort of a mutual love for one another that I suspect grandparents are just supposed to have for their grandkids, but grandkids don't always have for their grandparents. But I really loved my grandfather and really came to not just admire him for all of the words that you described him as, but for who he really was. I will talk a little bit about his family.

([14:25](#)):

His mother dies when he's 17 years old, and the folks there in Great Barrington kind of adopt him. They help him to become able to go to Fisk University, David mentioned Fisk. He goes from Great Barrington to Fisk, and part of the puzzle there is they raise some money to help him go. He goes there and he works to pay his way through Fisk. He earns a bachelor's degree at Fisk. As David mentions, they didn't recognize that at Harvard. And so he has to re-earn that bachelor's degree and then goes on to the PhD.

([15:04](#)):

My great grandfather's father, so my great-great grandfather, he was a union soldier. He didn't stay with the family very long. He left not too long after grandpa was born. Black people in that part of the world were a part of. We can have a conversation about the Du-Bois Washington controversies that come up later on in life and why those two leaders are so different. But this is part of that story. It's part of the fact that we had free, unenslaved black people who lived in Massachusetts during that time and were part of fighting for freedom in this country, going all the way back to the American Revolution.

([15:48](#)):

Grandpa and Nina get married in 1896. They meet at Wilberforce. So when Grandpa leaves Harvard, he goes and looks for a job and he gets an offer from Wilberforce University in Ohio. And he goes there to teach, and Nina is a student there and they meet and they fall in love. One of the things that I wanted to share with you are these rings that you can see on my finger. There are actually two of them, they come together in a pair. And one is the engagement ring that grandpa gave Nina in 1895, and the other is her wedding band. These rings are in our family since then. They got lost for about 40 years, but we found them. And so it's an honor to share these with you for the first time. This is the first time they've been seen in public for probably the better part of 50 years. And you can see my great grandmother had very small fingers.

([16:51](#)):

One of the things I think I really find most fascinating about his life is an essay that he wrote called Of the Passing of the First-Born. Nina and grandpa had Burghardt, their firstborn son. Burghardt dies at

about 18 months old. He contracts diphtheria and the black doctor doesn't have the medicine to treat him, and the white doctor won't treat him because he's black. At the time, Nina and grandpa are living in Atlanta, Georgia, and the South was not very amenable to helping and treating and working with black folks in an equal way, let's just say. So, Burghardt dies at about 18 months old from the disease that the white doctor won't treat.

[\(17:42\)](#):

I think that the stories that go along with grandpa's life that move him from one place to another in his thinking are ones that are fascinating to me because they're historical events that really are ones that sometimes aren't very well known, and most people would not really know about Burghardt's death or the impact that, that really had, not just on grandpa and Nina, but ultimately on African American history because it really does change his perspective about race and how he addresses race.

[\(18:17\)](#):

And I know Whitney, you wanted to talk a little bit about some of the things that also changed grandpa's perspective about some of that. He's living in Atlanta and he has some really interesting experiences, some of which fit into that historical context.

Dr. Whitney Battle-Baptiste [\(18:36\)](#):

Thank you, Arthur. That was an amazing segue because in 1898, there was an incident that affected Du Bois' focus, his concentration. Remember, he had already published the Philadelphia Negro, which was based on his sociological study of the black urban areas of Philadelphia through the University of Pennsylvania. He goes to Atlanta. I'm actually going to quote him because I could tell the story but I'm going to tell after I give you some of his words about the specific incident. "I had found that this Negro, Sam Hose"... Before I continue, I just want to say that this is about reflections on a lynching. So I am going to kind of give a warning that it is a little bit graphic, and it has to do with the violence that was happening in Georgia, specifically right outside of Atlanta at this moment, 1898. "I found that this Negro, Sam Hose, had been caught and lynched, and that in the meat market, which was on the way, I had to pass, his fingers and toes were being exhibited. Well, I didn't deliver the letter. I went back to Atlanta University, and then I made up my mind that knowledge wasn't enough. That even if people were ignorant of essential matters, which they had to know, they wouldn't correct their actions without more realization of just what the difficulties were. They had not only to know, but they had to act. And so I changed from studying the Negro problem to propaganda, to letting people know just what the Negro problem meant in what the colored people were suffering and what was happening and kept doing."

[\(21:07\)](#):

So I want to signal that because the reason why Du Bois was walking in that particular area is he was on his way to the Atlanta Constitution, which is a newspaper. And he was going to meet the editor who's name might be familiar to some, Joel Chandler Harris. And he was going to meet with him to specifically deliver a letter of outrage about the recent lynching of this man named Sam Hose. So he was already in the mode of trying to bring attention and have something published because he is a scholar, he is a warrior with words. And what he realizes at that moment is that it is not enough for those words to be facts, for those words to be truth, observations, but also this idea that his work could actually lead to people not only understanding what was happening, but taking action and trying to stop it or trying to shift what was happening in the country.

[\(22:25\)](#):

And he was not alone. I do want to invoke the name of Ida B. Wells, who was one of the primary women, African American, one of the first investigative journalists as an African American woman who

spearheaded the anti-lynching campaign from as early as the 1870s. And so I wanted to really emphasize that it was not just the work, it was not just the scholarship, it was not just having studied in bur University of Berlin. It was not having the first PhD from the illustrious Harvard University, but yet what it was, was the reality of losing a son the same year as he witnesses a lynching so close to home that he was able to learn of this man's body parts being on display.

[\(23:18\)](#):

It is traumatic, but it is an everyday occurrence, and it was something that Du Bois wanted to bring attention to, not just African Americans, but to all people within the United States. I'm going to now pass it on to my colleague, Adam, to talk a little bit of about Du Bois as the historian and how he restructures the way we think about our past.

Adam Holmes [\(23:50\)](#):

Good afternoon, everyone. I think this is really an important moment that we've zeroed in on terms of the time that Du Bois is at in his long life. Everyone's life has flashpoints within it, Du Bois has many of them. I'm sure we'll touch on a lot of them. But, this period here where he's still a young man and he's still getting used to the world that he finds himself in the south and some of the shocking facts that he may have known in the abstract going in, but certainly was not prepared for just how shocking they'd be to be confronted with in reality.

[\(24:27\)](#):

The fact of the matter is that the reason that Du Bois is learning about incidents like the lynching of Sam Hose, the reason that his son is denied treatment in what can only really be described as a kind of extrajudicial murder, the fact that there he witnesses and has to live through segregation and Jim Crow laws. The fact that at Fisk University, his alma mater, there's an enormous bell that was rung not for services and not for assemblies, but to warn students of the approach of the Klan, all of this traces back to the history in this country of slavery. Slavery, which led directly to the most destructive war in this country's history, the American Civil War, the legacy of which was the initial experiment with what was called Reconstruction, its failure, and the counter revolution of the southern Jim Crow era, the legacy of which of course still persists to this day.

[\(25:25\)](#):

So for me personally, coming to Du Bois, I was doing a masters in American Studies looking at Civil War memory, looking at the way Americans think about the Civil War, the way that memory has been in many ways, distorted. Anyone who reads a newspaper these days, in fact, even this last week, seeing the way that we're still arguing about should we have monuments to Robert E. Lee in the middle of major cities. And the famous one in Richmond was just taken down. Anyone who follows along knows that this is an incredibly relevant conversation to this day, made the more so by an absolutely beacons body of historiographical work, academic work, serious scholarships, so it called, that perpetuates a false narrative of the Civil War in its aftermath that seeks to write black people out of the story and to legitimize and to how even celebrate and excuse the south's behavior as its sort of impose an autocratic system, an oligarchy of white supremacy on half of the country, if not in fact the whole thing.

[\(26:38\)](#):

So what you get is when you are looking back at the history of the early 20th century trying as I was to write a review of the literature around this topic, thinking where the hell is the counter narrative to all this lost cause ideology? Who is the voice who's going to come out and say something about this? And I'd never heard the name W.E.B. Du Bois before, but there he was a lone voice in the wilderness from

the moment he leaves Fisk and gives a commencement address about Jefferson Davis two years before his death in 1961, he writes about the same topic.

[\(27:14\)](#):

He's jousting with this idea of the memory of this incident. Not just in scholarly works like the Black Reconstruction, which I have here, which is, as you can see, quite large and somewhat dense, shall we say, but still a major work of scholarship, but also in editorials for the crisis in shorter, more reflective and more immediately accessible pieces such as passages, for example, in The Souls of Black Folk. This being the UMass Press edition, which I urge everyone to go out and buy.

[\(27:50\)](#):

So I found Du Bois through the study of this topic, and I realized that not just that his approach was so immediately accessible and so moving because of his eloquence and because of his incredible depth of scholarship and understanding, but also its influence, the fact that he's a visionary who not just gives us a new way of looking at this era of American history, but he completely changes the academic approach. So when you see that Robert D. Lee statue being ignominiously sawn in half and put in the back of a truck and driven away, thank Du Bois among others. But thank Du Bois because it's partly his exposure of some of the lies and some of the untruths around the American memory of history that helps us to process that on this very day.

Mistie Hague Weishaar [\(28:50\)](#):

Thank you so much, Whitney. Adam, an Arthur, that was really great. We love hearing your stories and your experiences and what has brought you to have a passion for Du Bois and his work.

Speaker 1 [\(29:06\)](#):

Thank you for listening to part one of the discussion. Listen to the next episode for part two.