



## Live the Legacy Podcast

Live the Legacy podcast captures bold conversations between civil rights icons and today's student activists. These conversations bridge the past and the present in order to move forward together. Listen today on our [website](#) or your favorite podcast app.

### Season 1, Episode 2: Interview with Charles Koppelman

Celebrate the 50th anniversary of the 26th Amendment by listening to a first-hand account of what it took to pass such an important amendment. This episode features a conversation between Charles Koppelman and [Evan Malbrough](#). Charles is a filmmaker, writer, and producer. 50 years ago, he helped lobby in favor of the 26th Amendment, which lowered the voting age in the country to 18 and protects against age discrimination at the ballot box. Evan is an Andrew Goodman Fellow, writer of [The Hitchhiker's Guide To Building A Youth Poll Worker Project](#) and founder of the Georgia Youth Poll Worker Project.

### Transcript

**Evan:** Me and Charles had this conversation in the car. I just simply remember talking about it because I think we were on our way to the interview on Auburn Ave right. Because you were driving me and you were talking and I was like I was like, oh, how did you get into this? Oh, you know, I worked to pass the 26th Amendment. And I was in there pretending I knew what the 26th Amendment was.

**Charles:** Yeah, but see, whether you knew it or not, you're the product of all that work.

**Mo:** This is Live the Legacy, a podcast presented to you by the Andrew Goodman Foundation. Today's guests include Charles Koppelman. Charles is a filmmaker, writer, and producer. He makes documentaries, music videos and commercials. And 50 years ago, he helped lobby in favor of the 26th Amendment, which lowered the voting age in the country to 18 and protects against age discrimination at the ballot box. He now lives in Berkeley, California, with his wife Deborah, where he is working on a documentary about the youth vote.

We are also joined by Evan Malbrough. Evan is a native of Smyrna, Georgia. He was an Andrew Goodman Vote Everywhere Ambassador during his time as an undergrad at Georgia State University. Evan is a current Puffin Democracy Fellow with the Andrew Goodman Foundation, as well as a Brand Ambassador for Mars Wrigley and Instagram. Evan is the founder of the Georgia Youth Poll Worker Project, where he recruited over 1,000 poll workers to work the 2020 general election and the 2021 Georgia runoff. Evan is also a writer who has been featured in publications such as Forbes, Blavity, Teen Vogue, and the Atlanta Journal Constitution. Without further ado, please enjoy the latest episode of Live the Legacy as we bridge the past and the present to move forward together.

**Evan:** All right, let's get it. Hello. Hello, Charles. Nice to see you.

**Charles:** Nice to be here, thanks Evan!

**Evan:** Oh how the tables are turned, right. We switched interview positions from our first meeting, so it's nice to see you again. I would love to poke around in your brain a little bit for the next few minutes.

**Charles:** Sure.

**Evan:** So, you lobbied and helped pass the 26th Amendment, which currently in the year 2021, is going into its 50th anniversary. So, what was that like? Because as a 23-year-old, thinking that--the idea that there was a time when 18 year olds couldn't vote is completely foreign to me. So, what was it like advocating for A) a constitutional amendment but also a constitutional amendment that specifically changed one of America's fundamental rights, as in voting?

**Charles:** Right, yeah. No, it was pretty exciting. At the point where I got started, I was actually 17, and I had just graduated from high school in California where I grew up, and I went to Washington, D. C. for a workshop in government and politics because that's the kind of thing I was interested in. And one of the guest speakers was from an organization that was heavily involved in lowering the voting age, called the Youth Franchise Coalition, and I was looking to stay in DC for the summer. So, I just went up to him afterwards and pitched him and said, "I really like what sounds like you guys are doing. Do you need any help?" And he said, "Yeah, we can't pay you, but we'll pay your expenses." So, I was like an intern before we used that term a lot, and I spent the summer I'm sorry, go ahead.

**Evan:** I said, oh, really? What was the term called?

**Charles:** I don't know. He just said, yeah, we'll bring you on, but we can't pay you. So, I guess maybe *intern* was used. So, I got to work in Washington for the whole summer. It was a very small group, a coalition of other organizations like the [ACLU](#), [The Lawyers Committee on Civil Rights](#), the [NAACP](#). There was just a handful of us. We were starting on all fronts at that point. There were activities in the states to lower the voting age in various states, especially Ohio, other parts of the Midwest. We weren't sure what was going to work, so we started everything. And that was the state by state and also the federal idea of lowering the voting age nationally. Coming out of high school at that point, late 60s, it was pretty intense politically, the war in Vietnam, the civil rights movement was still bubbling. So, there was a lot of energy and a lot of justice issues having to do with voting.

**Evan:** Wow. And just for reference, for those listening, probably my age as well, what was the voting age before the 26th Amendment was passed?

**Charles:** Right, so, at that point it was a state-by-state determination -- states set the voting age. And like today, the local state jurisdictions have a lot of control over voting: voting rights, voting rules, voting regulations. So at that stage, I believe Hawaii had a 19 year old vote and Alaska had a 20 year old vote, and Ohio had a referendum that was on the ballot to lower it to 19. So, it was a real like, hodgepodge of voting ages. The rest of the states were all 21. And one of our points to the Congress and one of the lobbying issues was, hey, let's uniform. This isn't fair, that if you're 19, you can vote in Hawaii, but if you're 19, you can't vote in California. So, there was a lot of logic into making it one set age.

**Evan:** So how did you guys settle on the age of 18? Right? So you're at 21, there was some 19, there was some 20. So, what made you go all the way down to 18 and even stop there? Right? So why not 17, why not 16?

**Charles:** Right, I think the main reason was that that was draft age, that you could be drafted at 18 and not only did it seem like a point of justice in terms if you're going to be drafted, which people aren't familiar now, but if you were drafted, you had to go in the army. You know, either that or you had to try and get a conscientious objection ruling that you didn't believe in war and so forth. So, you had to go fight at 18 if they drafted you. And obviously the war was very controversial in terms of whether it was moral, whether it was corrupt, and so forth. So it became a justice issue at 18, but it also was, in terms of the draft, a kind of logical number, since there were some at 19, some at 20. It's like, let's just make it all 18.

**Evan:** So let's move off the topic and talk about strategy. Right? So, you were able to pass a constitutional amendment without the internet, without social media, before cell phones. Hopefully I'm not totally aging you, but you're able to organize, help organize and play a part in a massive movement without many of the--what is it? Many of the amenities and activist tools we have today. So, what strategies did you guys employ to get the word out, but then also change public opinion and the opinion of elected officials as well?

**Charles:** It was a lot of what we still do today underneath the digital kind of activism and organizing: letter writing, face to face organizing, especially on campuses, meetings, rallies, like I said, state capitals, testifying, getting hearings set up, getting people to go to those hearings, press activity. And I think what made this special was because it was a coalition of other organizations that had large memberships, it was fairly straightforward to get the word out sort of through all the organizations that were part of this effort. So, for example, I can remember if we needed to get the word out in a certain state because there were hearings coming up, we would contact our member groups, pick up the phone, write a letter saying, "Hey, Dear YMCA or dear NAACP, we have some hearings coming up next month in the state capital. We need to get some people out." So you just build it that way and there are no shortcuts. Even today with the digital organizing, as you know, you still have to follow up, you still have to be persistent, you still have to count, how many do I have? How many do I need? And remind people to show up. All that stuff we had to do too.

**Evan:** Wow that's amazing, that's amazing. So going a little bit deeper into strategy. So who was the biggest standout or the biggest opposition to lowering the voting age to 18, and how did you change their mind?

**Charles:** Uh-huh, good question. There was a lot of opposition, especially from politicians who felt threatened by an expanded franchise—mostly Republicans, but even some Democrats who were in districts that had large campuses or a young demographic. They immediately felt the political threat, potentially, of losing the next election if thousands, maybe millions of people started voting that weren't enfranchised. So that was kind of the core opposition, and there was no real way to change their minds, so much as to present arguments on our side because it's hard to argue with a politician, you might lose your election, but so what? I mean, that's their job. As it turned out, ironically, after the voting age was lowered, it didn't make that much difference at the beginning. A lot of these politicians who were worried about it, in fact, did get reelected because there was a lot of apathy, there was a lot of getting young people up to speed with how to register and how to vote. So the immediate impact actually was not present. And I think probably a lot of the opposition maybe did their own research, did their own polls, and figured out maybe not going to hurt us that much.

**Evan:** Oh, wow, that's interesting. So you talk about in that last statement how there was this idea that things didn't really change immediately after lowering the enfranchisement age for young people. So now, as we're seeing 50 years later, now we're seeing that young people are now kind of taking the reins of the election system, right? In this past election, 50% of young people actually turned out to vote in the presidential election. And in my home state of Georgia, one in five voters during the subsequent double Senate runoff were young people as well. So, going back to being 17 in the late sixties, height of the Vietnam War, trying to pass an amendment to give those very same young people the right to vote 50 years later, how does it feel now that now the Generation Z generation is coming out in such droves to vote?

**Charles:** It's terrifically exciting to see what's happening with young voters and you, for example, as a poll worker and training other poll workers and expanding not just the franchise, but the hands-on work that young people can do to protect the franchise. It's terrifically fulfilling, and that's one reason I'm making this documentary about the youth vote, because what we started in the late 60s and what passed with the 26th Amendment was terrific in itself, but maybe it's taken this long to really evolve and grow into something that's deeply meaningful for American politics. And sometimes these changes have an arc that's not quick, it takes a while to have impact. So, seeing those numbers like you spoke about, it's terrific. And I'm hoping to capture some of that kind of history back then, the moment now in the last election and what's going on now with voter suppression efforts--Capture that in this documentary film. I'm in production on what I think is going to be a half hour documentary in a series on voting. This first half hour is about youth voting and it combines a look at the past with, as we spoke, efforts to lower the voting age, how that happened, who was involved, and then a look to today with what young people are doing, not just with the vote on their own behalf, but organizing for others to vote, encouraging registration and being active citizens. And so that will be the idea this half hour, and we're hoping to finish it before the end of the year while it's still the 50th anniversary of the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

**Evan:** Amazing, amazing. Thank you, thank you. Now, speaking of voter suppression, right now we see a large amount of voter suppression bills and voter suppressing level reforms to our

election systems nationwide. Right. Texas is passing laws restricting voting. Georgia has passed laws, Florida has passed laws. All coming--kind of following a common thread, like restricting no excuse absentee ballots, lowering the times for runoffs and elections themselves, lowering resources, and then also increasing red tape on local precincts. So how do you feel about these new reforms, the negative reforms that are coming about because of the 20, what many say is because of the 2020 election?

**Charles:** Every time I read another story about these local regulations and state regulations that are either proposed or actually adopted, it's just painful. It's really hard to understand and hard to take. And I feel like the other shoe hasn't dropped yet. I'm just hoping--I'm not involved politically, not much, I'm a filmmaker--But I'm just hoping that perhaps at the federal level, the national legislation will somehow squeak through or there'll be some judicial effort to normalize elections and regulate them uniformly. I mean, it's very similar to the 18 year old vote. And some of those issues are going to come back to the surface, which is local and state regulations that are not consistent. So, a lot of how I feel is, you know, people are paying attention, smart people are paying attention, people who have stakes are paying attention. So maybe this can get stopped or even rolled back, but it's a big concern.

**Evan:** Absolutely, absolutely. And to all those listening, please look up the For the People Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Act, as well as follow a lot of the cases that are challenging these laws across the nation. So, Charles, my final question let's say a young 17 year old fresh out of high school walks up to you and says, "Hey, you know what? I want to pass a constitutional amendment." It's such a tall order these days. Right, but it wasn't so much of a short order back then. Right?

**Charles:** It's true. I mean, just to be fair, it wasn't like just my idea. There were a number of people that, when I jumped on, were already active for a couple of years. And plus --and this is what my film will get into--Some of the national political leaders were trying to do this starting in the 40s. A couple of Senators, Jennings Randolph from West Virginia introduced a bill every year, I think, starting 1947, to lower the voting age. Never got anywhere. It was always voted down. But there were some key people who had been beating that drum for a while, but that said, if someone came to me and said, "hey, I want to get involved in making some major change," whether it's voting or some other political structure, as I learned, find your brothers and sisters, you can't do it by yourself. And find the organizations that are already doing that. Like, I was able to jump onto this Youth Franchise Coalition in Washington, DC. Because they're probably out there. So, find them, talk to them, volunteer, see if they're open to having you help them, which they usually are, because they're always shorthanded. So be part of something bigger and then be patient. It's not going to happen overnight.

Whether it's the 26th Amendment, turning back bad voting regulations, like we're seeing, all that stuff takes time, and young people tend to be impatient, but you've got to kind of stick with it and understand that enough people get together and are smart and have a good strategy, it could happen. I mean, we were surprised. I was surprised actually, looking back to realize how bipartisan that 26th Amendment was. It passed by a huge margin in Congress, and it has to be ratified by state legislatures. And that happened. I don't have the exact number, but in a matter of months, states said yes, yes, yes, yes. It was the fastest adoption of a constitutional amendment in American history. So, you never know if your timing is good, and you sync up with supporters and allies. I mean, we have footage of Barry Goldwater, a very conservative

senator from Arizona, testifying in Congress in support of the 18-year-old vote, and it was very bipartisan. It's hard to imagine there were Republicans who actually supported this idea, and the climate in Washington was not as split and as combative as it is now.

**Evan:** All right, cool. So, Charles, why was it important the 26th Amendment made it legal for 18-year-olds to vote nationwide. So, why is it important for young people, especially the 18-year-olds coming up now? Why is it important for them to vote?

**Charles:** Once you get in the habit of participating in our political culture and government, then it's a habit you're going to continue. And so, the earlier you start, the better, and the more it'll become part of your life and just kind of a natural thing you do every two years or four years. And if you haven't voted yet, try it. See how you feel when you go in. Now, it's probably more in person or even absentee, and you drop off the ballot in the mailbox. Just see how it makes you feel inside, because you will realize, I think, that it connects you into American society and government in a new and different way that you didn't expect. I just believe that that's what happens. And when my wife and I go to vote, because my kids are more grown now, but when they were young, we always took them to the precinct, and they got to stand in the booth with us and just see it and experience it. That kind of thing helps you understand your connection to the process, and it's really important to realize yeah--every vote does make a difference. It sounds like a cliché, but there's so many elections that have been so close.

**Evan:** Wow. Well, Charles, any lasting words or any last tidbits of advice?

**Charles:** Not really. Just that I hope people listen to this--will understand that social change is kind of a lifelong commitment. And whether it's an issue this month and maybe it's going to be a different subject a year from now or ten years from now, whatever, that's fine. Just stick with it. Do your thing. Be part of it. Mine now is making films about it, which is my little contribution. And I think, Evan, you're a terrific model for what young people can do.

**Mo:** This concludes this week's episode of Live the Legacy. Thank you to our guests, Charles Koppelman and Evan Malbrough, and a special thank you to Tabeeek Music for all the music that you heard throughout today's episode. If you enjoyed this episode of Live the Legacy podcast, please leave us a review and don't forget to subscribe so that you never miss an episode. Until next time, this has been your host, Mo Banks, with the Andrew Goodman Foundation. Bye, everyone.