

TRISTON CHASE O'SAVIO

DREAMS

— *for* —

MY SON

A TEN STEP BLUEPRINT TO RECLAIMING
THE AMERICAN DREAM



Copyright © 2026 by Triston Chase O'Savio

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission from the publisher, except for brief quotations used in reviews or scholarly works.

Internal design by Chelsea Lockhart / Written in Melanin

Published by Muffin Man Publications

ISBN: 9798218898533

This book is a work of nonfiction. Certain names and identifying details may have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

*I dedicate this book to my son, Sparrow.
May you grow up in a world filled with love, peace, and tranquility,
opportunity, and in a stronger, more vibrant democracy than the one
you were born into.*

DREAMS FOR MY SON

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| PREFACE | 1 |
| INTRODUCTION | 13 |
| CHAPTER 1 | 23 |
| MY PARENTS' JOURNEY TOWARD THE AMERICAN DREAM | |
| CHAPTER 2 | 41 |
| A TEN-POINT BLUEPRINT TO RECLAIM THE AMERICAN DREAM | |
| CHAPTER 3 | 55 |
| POINT 1—CULTURE REFORM: WHY DON'T WE, AS VOTERS, FEEL MORE SEEN? | |
| CHAPTER 4 | 63 |
| POINT 2—ELECTION REFORM: WHY ARE OUR ELECTIONS WON AND LOST BEFORE WE VOTE? | |

CHAPTER 5..... 91

POINT 3—TRANSPORTATION: WHY IS TRANSPORTATION SO EXPENSIVE?

CHAPTER 6..... 103

POINT 4—CHILDCARE REFORM: WHY IS CHILDCARE SO EXPENSIVE?

CHAPTER 7..... 113

POINT 5—HOUSING REFORM: WHY IS HOUSING SO EXPENSIVE?

CHAPTER 8.....123

POINT 6—SMALL BUSINESS: WHY IS IT SO HARD TO START AND RUN A SMALL BUSINESS

CHAPTER 9.....133

POINT 7—EDUCATION: HOW DO WE BEST PROTECT OUR SCHOOLS?

CHAPTER 10155

POINT 8—TECHNOLOGY: HOW TO CONTAIN TECH, ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, ROBOTICS AND MECHANIZATION

CHAPTER 11..... 169

POINT 9—HEALTHCARE REFORM

CHAPTER 12247

POINT 10—CLIMATE CHANGE: HOW TO ADDRESS THE CLIMATE CRISIS

CHAPTER 13269

WHAT HAPPENED TO OUR DEMOCRACY AND HOW WE CAN GET IT BACK

CONCLUSION283

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS289

ABOUT THE AUTHOR.....297

REFERENCES.....I

DREAMS

————— *for* —————

MY SON

PREFACE

WHEN MY FATHER'S FAMILY was preparing to immigrate to the United States, and my mother was growing up in Washington D.C. during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, they both saw immense promise in the pursuit of the American Dream. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, along with the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, marked a pivotal moment in American history. These milestones advanced the rights of individuals who had long been marginalized due to their race or gender, reshaping the nation's commitment to equality and justice. Schools became more inclusive, the job market opened up, and hope began to take root among marginalized communities of color, fueled by the belief that they, too, would one day have a fair opportunity to pursue the American Dream—a future defined by equality, opportunity, and the chance to thrive.

The Civil Rights movement inspired both of my parents. It made them believers in the American Dream. It led them to believe that through education, hard work, and determination, they would have access to opportunities that could build a better life for their children.

Back then, they were inspired to pursue the American Dream not because opportunity was guaranteed, but because they *perceived* opportunity—because they *saw* it.

MY FATHER CAME from the streets of Jamaica. My mother grew up in the housing projects of Washington, D.C. during the busing era. They had very little. But they had one thing: hope in pursuit of the American Dream. And that hope was rooted in education.

Education gave them a way out; a way forward. In college, my father, Roderick Washington O'Savio, studied marketing and business. My mother, Sherrie Denise O'Savio, studied education and English. They met at Davis & Elkins College in West Virginia, and together, they built a life grounded in purpose and possibility for my sister and me.

They got married. They started a business—The Muffin Man Caribbean Café—which became one of the most successful Jamaican restaurants in the DMV. They worked hard. And they were fortunate to have the support of my grandmother, Mee-Mee Madge Eugene Toppins, and my aunt, Paullette O'Savio, who helped raise my sister and me while my parents worked late nights. It truly took a village to care for two children while operating a small business.

Thanks to the success of our small family business, my parents were able to invest in our future and well-being. They funded my education at Woodberry Forest School and my sister's at Madeira. They gave us the tools and opportunities to thrive in spaces where we were often the minority, and they prepared us not just for college, but for life.

I went on to attend Dickinson College, where I played basketball and earned a degree in economics, and later pursued a law degree. But none of that would have been possible without the sacrifices my parents made. Their ability to provide a stable home, affordable groceries to nourish us, reliable transportation, and the unwavering belief that education could transform our lives laid the foundation

for my success. With extra resources, they invested in our learning—including hiring a math tutor, which I desperately needed—and gave us the chance to dream bigger.

Their story is the embodiment of the American Dream.

But today, that dream feels increasingly out of reach. Back then, approximately 90 percent of baby boomers earned more than their parents, embodying what many considered the American Dream. For that generation, surpassing their parents' income was a common reality. Today, however, only about 50 percent of millennials are outearning their parents, and projections suggest the figure will be even lower for Generation Z. As a result, the promise of the American Dream is becoming increasingly elusive for younger generations.

My son—and his generation—is growing up in a country where that dream, once defined by opportunity and upward mobility, feels more distant than ever.

MY SON, SPARROW Chase O'Savio, and I genuinely love living in the great Commonwealth of Virginia. From the vibrant food scene to the beautiful outdoor spaces, Virginia offers a unique blend of culture, community, and natural beauty that feels like home. Growing up in a restaurant, food has always been a source of comfort and connection for my family—and Northern Virginia delivers some of the best. Whether it's savoring world-class Korean cuisine at Yechon in Annandale, indulging in bean-paste pastries next door at the Breeze Cafe, grabbing wings at Jimmy's in Herndon, or enjoying a slice of cheese pizza at my son's favorite spot, Deli Italiano, we've built memories around the flavors of this region. One of my favorite times of the year is Mason District's Restaurant Week, when restaurant owners from Annandale, Lincolnia, Bailey's Crossroads, and Seven Corners come together to

4 DREAMS FOR MY SON

showcase the area's rich and diverse culinary offerings. We also cherish the nature that Virginia has to offer. We look forward to weekend hikes in Shenandoah, peaceful runs on the W&OD Trail, and quiet moments by the water in Falls Church. Virginia has so much to offer—and it will always feel like home.

But as much as we love living here, the reality is that surviving as a single working-class parent in Northern Virginia feels increasingly difficult. The cost of simply existing—housing, childcare, healthcare, transportation, and everyday necessities—has become overwhelming. What once felt like a place full of opportunity now feels like a place where opportunity is priced out of reach. For families like mine, the financial strain is constant, and the dream of building a stable future feels more elusive with each passing month.

Groceries are expensive. The cost of living is expensive. Property taxes are expensive. Income taxes are expensive. Car taxes are expensive. Childcare is expensive. Healthcare is expensive. Running a small business is expensive. Higher education is expensive. Owning and maintaining a car is expensive. Gas is expensive. Car insurance is expensive. Car taxes are expensive. Maintaining a car is expensive. Even driving on roads—roads we've already paid for through our taxes—is expensive. Now we're charged tolls by private companies to use the very infrastructure our public dollars helped build. Everything is so damn expensive.

When everything is expensive, the dream for progress and prosperity becomes distant.

Because of these relentless monthly expenses, I'm beginning to question whether the American Dream—the dream of giving your child a better life full of opportunity—is slipping out of reach.

When everything is expensive, it becomes nearly impossible to get ahead; to invest in your family's future; to build wealth. It makes you

doubt whether education, hard work, grit, and determination will be enough for your child to have a better life than the one they inherited. It makes you doubt whether your children will have more opportunities, a stronger foundation, and a clearer path to prosperity because of all your hard work.

Education no longer guarantees opportunity. Inflation is suffocating. The housing crisis is displacing families. Tariffs and misguided economic policies are hurting small businesses. Teachers, restaurant owners, and other essential workers can't afford to live in the communities they serve. They're being priced out—of counties, cities, and even the state.

We must ask ourselves: What kind of future are we building if the very people who hold our communities together can't afford to live in them? From healthcare to childcare, transportation to housing, the cost of simply existing has become overwhelming for working families. And now, with the growing trend of privatizing education, even public schooling—a cornerstone of opportunity—is at risk of becoming inaccessible. These compounding pressures are not just economic; they threaten the very foundation of upward mobility and community stability.

Healthcare, for example, is outrageously expensive. So expensive, in fact, that many working-class parents and small business owners are forced to gamble with their health—going without coverage and hoping they don't get sick. But skipping preventative care can be risky and dangerous. It leads to avoidable emergencies, and when those emergencies strike, families face not only the trauma of illness but the crushing weight of medical debt. One hospital visit can derail a family's entire financial future, diverting resources away from groceries, education, and long-term investments in family wealth. All of which is worsened by the privatization of healthcare. For example, Medicare

Advantage—formally known as Medicare Part D—was pushed through in 2003 by Republicans and Corporate Democrats. It's now a vehicle for corporate profiteering. Private insurers are exploiting the system through fraudulent upcoding and misdiagnoses, siphoning off hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars in lump-sum payments from the federal government. We need to redirect this legalized thievery of funds into an equitable, inclusive, and *quality* healthcare system for *all*.

Childcare is very expensive. For single parents without family nearby—like my own parents when they were building The Muffin Man Caribbean Café—childcare can be the difference between working and staying home. And too often, it's mothers who are forced to leave the workforce, sacrificing income and career growth simply because childcare costs are unaffordable. In places like Fairfax County and Northern Virginia, where dual incomes are often necessary just to survive, this is a crisis. I remember when my family and I were searching for local childcare options, it was incredibly difficult to find a facility that not only made our son feel safe and comfortable, but was also financially feasible for our family. After much consideration, we ultimately settled on a provider—but that decision came with a significant financial burden. For just three days a week of care, we were paying over \$350, which added up to a staggering \$1,400 per month. This expense placed a significant strain on our monthly budget and became yet another financial pressure point for our family.

Transportation is expensive. Also increasingly exploitative. When I was a kid, toll roads cost only a few bucks (with the exception of driving into New York), with the expectation that our funds would get reinvested into the roads maintaining public infrastructure. Today, private toll companies like Toll Road Investors 2 (owners of the Dulles Greenway), I-66 Outside the Beltway, and Express Lanes LLC are exploiting working-class drivers with impunity. They charge \$7.50 for

a single toll—and tack on a \$25.00 “administration fee” in the same transaction. That’s over 300% more than the advertised price. It’s deceptive. It’s predatory. It’s highway robbery. And they do it because they can legally get away with it.

In August 2025, Dulles Greenway charged me \$130.10 over the course of two days solely for picking up and dropping off my son as part of our shared custody agreement. These costs place an undue financial burden on families—funds that could otherwise support essential needs such as groceries, school supplies, or savings. It is deeply concerning that, despite already paying taxes intended for road maintenance and vehicle-related expenses, we are subject to additional tolls—fees that benefit private corporations rather than the public.

The existence of car taxes and other infrastructure-related levies raises a fundamental question: Why aren’t these revenues being used to offset the cost of using public highways? Our current transportation system lacks transparency and fairness, and it disproportionately affects everyday families simply trying to meet their financial responsibilities. As State Senator Jennifer Boysko accurately pointed out in a 2003 *Virginia Mercury* article, “The people who live in our community spend \$400 to \$500 a month on transportation, and if you go on [toll roads], very few people are riding on it because it’s so expensive and other avenues are clogged.” We need relief. And we need it now.

Moreover, housing is criminally expensive. My parents bought our childhood home for \$70,000. Today, that same home is valued at \$434,582—a 520% increase since the 1990s. That’s not growth. That’s a housing crisis. My son’s mother, also a lawyer, had to move to Pennsylvania just to afford a decent living. It’s not ideal, but it’s the reality for many families who are being priced out of Northern Virginia.

We’re often taught that buying a home is a cornerstone of the

American Dream—that homeownership is a pathway to building equity and long-term financial stability. While that may be true in theory, the reality for many younger families today is far more complicated. High interest rates and soaring mortgage costs are pricing young working-class professionals out of homeownership altogether. In my case, I'm currently paying \$3,800 per month on my mortgage, which includes a 5% interest rate (and a \$275 condo fee!). Most of those payments are going to the lender in the form of interest—not toward building equity in my home. It's disheartening to realize that such a large portion of my income is being consumed by housing costs, without the financial growth or return that homeownership is supposed to provide. It has left me questioning whether I am going to achieve the American Dream.

And now, we're seeing a dangerous push to privatize public education through voucher programs. These programs threaten to strip federal protections against discrimination, divert public funds from already underfunded schools in Fairfax, Loudoun, and Prince William Counties, and funnel taxpayer money into private institutions that serve only the wealthy and well-connected. Public schools are already struggling—with overcrowded classrooms, underpaid teachers, and limited resources. Privatization will gut these systems, leaving working-class families with no viable options. Teachers won't be able to afford to live in the communities they serve. Students will be forced to travel long distances—often on expensive toll roads—just to attend school.

Notice the pattern here: The privatization of healthcare. The privatization of our roads. The privatization of education.

Healthcare, roads, housing, and education should serve as foundational services funded by our hard-earned taxpayer dollars—investments that directly support the general welfare, as promised by the Constitution. When families can redirect more of their income

toward building a stable and prosperous future, they not only feel the rewards of their labor but also gain a real sense of progress toward achieving the American Dream.

But something else has played out here. Our society has become increasingly consumed by market-driven priorities—so focused on privatizing every aspect of public life—that it’s eating working class Americans alive. Month after month, families are feeling the pressure as their budgets are stretched thin from all sides. And among those most affected are single working-class parents, who often carry the heaviest burden with the fewest resources.

So, the question is: What tangible steps can we take to resolve these issues once and for all?

We need bold policy solutions, including, but not limited to:

- Universal healthcare that eliminates the need to gamble with your health.
- Public childcare subsidies that allow both parents to work and thrive.
- Regulation of toll roads to prevent corporate exploitation.
- Affordable housing initiatives to stabilize communities.
- Investment into public education to protect and strengthen our schools.

AS MUCH AS I want my son to enjoy his childhood, I also dream that he has a future to look forward to, a loving inclusive community to live in, opportunities to thrive and prosper, and a planet to live on. The American Dream should not be reserved for the wealthy. It should be accessible to every family willing to work for it. But right now, the cost

of simply existing is making that dream feel more like a myth.

Because of my parents' hard work and determination, I was able to become a successful attorney through perseverance and education. But I've come to understand that education alone is no longer a reliable path to opportunity—especially for my son. The rising costs of healthcare, housing, and everyday essentials are not just financial burdens; they are barriers that prevent families like mine from investing in the next generation. No matter how hard I work or how much I earn, the basic cost of living continues to erode the foundation I'm trying to build for my son's future. This is like other working class families not only in Northern Virginia, but throughout the state and the rest of the country.

This is what this book is about. It will outline the changes I believe are necessary to shift this trajectory—not just for my son, but for countless families facing the same uphill climb. This book is intended to serve as a blueprint for policy reform—one that not only gives working families a viable chance at pursuing the American Dream, but also provides real, tangible access to it.

MY NAME IS Triston Chase O'Savio. I currently serve as Assistant Solicitor General for the Commonwealth of Virginia, where I represent the state in appellate courts to defend its laws, civil liberties, and constitutional rights—particularly when state sovereignty faces federal overreach. In private practice, I was a commercial litigation and employment litigation attorney who proudly represented small businesses in my community. I'm also the founder of a nonprofit called The Muffin Man Project that is dedicated to raising funds for youth empowerment services in Northern Virginia. I'm the son of an immigrant father and a mother who grew up in Jim Crow America.

I serve as a Commissioner on the Fairfax County Board of Zoning

Appeals, where I adjudicate zoning disputes, review special permit applications, and hear appeals of decisions made by zoning officials. I'm also a member of the Virginia Democratic Central Committee, where we shape party policy, oversee operations, and guide election strategy.

I've been a teacher and a law school adjunct professor. I've served as a judicial law clerk to a federal judge, where I drafted judicial opinions and witnessed firsthand how federal rulings impact communities. I'm a Rotarian who deeply cares about his community and believes in making the world a better place through service.

And above all, I'm a father to my wonderful son, Sparrow Chase O'Savio.

As a father, and through my work in law, education, public service, and community leadership, I've seen how the odds are stacked against working-class people, like me. The cost of living—from housing and transportation to healthcare, childcare, and groceries—is rising at an unsustainable pace. Meanwhile, wages remain largely stagnant, leaving families struggling to keep up. Our pocketbooks are flat, and our hope of achieving the American Dream is fading.

People are feeling the pressure. And that pressure is dividing us—neighbor against neighbor, community against community. But here's the truth: we have more in common than we think. We all want what's best for our kids. We want a roof over our heads, food on the table, and the dignity of knowing that our hard work means something. We want to believe that our efforts will build a better future, for our families, and for our kids. That *is* the American Dream.

But affordability is crushing that dream. And instead of fighting the system that's failing us—fighting the 1% who benefit from the status quo—we're turning on each other. Right versus Left. Gay versus Straight. Red versus Blue. Black, Brown, Asian, Hispanic versus White.

All of us want to feel safe, welcome, and included in our communities. We all want to earn enough to provide for our families, ensuring food on the table and financial stability. Above all, we all love our children and are committed to their happiness, health, and ensuring that they have the opportunity to build a brighter future than the one that they inherited. Yet, despite these shared values, we find ourselves increasingly divided, drifting apart instead of coming together around the very issues that unite us.

We're being pitted against one another, distracted by wedge issues that do not improve the lives of working class families. I'm tired of being told to distrust or hate my neighbors because of how they look, who they love, how they identify, or what they believe. I'm tired of seeing marginalized communities—especially our transgender children—scapegoated, even though they make up less than 1% of the population. As Representative James Talarico says, we're focused on the wrong 1%.

INTRODUCTION

PROPOSE A NEW PATH forward. A new kind of politics—one that unites, not divides.

This book is written to connect with a broad audience and bridge the communication gap throughout Virginia and between people across this country. Because despite our differences, we're all struggling with the same core issues: affordability, survival, and dignity. We're being fed a false narrative that it's "their fault"—the fault of those who look, believe, or love differently. But we all want the same things: affordable healthcare, affordable housing, a livable income, reliable and affordable transportation, and a community where we feel welcome, valued, and invested in.

This book aims to unite us against what I believe is the greatest existential threat we face: the rise of authoritarianism, the erosion of democracy, and the fading belief in the American Dream. The three pillars—freedom, representation, and hope—are essential if we're going to reclaim our future. So, where do we go from here?

In this book, I lay out a 10-point blueprint to help us get our country back on track, save democracy, and reclaim the American Dream.

The first point discusses the need to unite the working class community and make our constituents feel seen. *We must* come together. And I believe the Democratic Party needs to lead the way—

by returning to its roots of championing policies that uplift the working class. That includes reaching out to Republican voters who share these same struggles. We must make every voter feel seen, heard, and valued regardless of their socioeconomic background or party status. We must show up in rural communities. But, before we reach out across the aisle, we must be united from within. We must embrace the reality that the Democratic Party is a party of *diverse perspectives*, and we should empower one another to express those views. Open dialogue, healthy debate, and public engagement are essential to challenging the status quo and driving meaningful progress. Every member should be entitled to share their beliefs (or support their candidate of choice) without fear of being silenced or ostracized by the very community that claims to stand behind them. And we must ensure that our most loyal voter bases—Black, Brown, LGBTQ+, immigrant, and working-class communities—never feel forgotten or taken for granted.

The second point discusses the need for widespread election reform. We live under a system of minority rule, where a small fraction of the population holds disproportionate power in Congress. Voter suppression and the outdated Electoral College have left millions feeling hopeless and disenfranchised. If we want a government that reflects the will of the people, we must reform our electoral system so that every vote counts and every voice matters.

The third point highlights the need for transportation reform to ensure safe, efficient, and equitable mobility. The fourth point emphasizes making childcare more affordable and accessible for working families. The fifth point calls for housing reform to address rising costs and expand access to stable living conditions. The sixth point advocates for laws that protect small businesses as engines of local economies. The seventh point underscores the importance of shielding our schools from partisan and bigoted attacks to preserve

inclusive education. The eighth point raises urgent concerns about unchecked advances in artificial intelligence, automation, and robotics. The ninth point calls for meaningful healthcare reform to fix a system that fails working-class people. And, the tenth point urges action on the climate crisis to safeguard our planet for future generations.

Points 3-10 are all policies that will protect *the general welfare of society*, as they are designed to help families build wealth, save for the future, and pursue the American Dream.

Right now, the cost of living is robbing people of hope. It's making them feel left behind. It's making them question whether their hard work will ever pay off.

I share my parents' story—their pursuit of the American Dream—and compare it to my own journey as a father. Their hard work created upward mobility for me. But today, I worry that my hard work may not do the same for my son. That's not how it should be. And it doesn't have to be.

THROUGHOUT THIS BOOK, I draw on my lived experience as a working-class, single parent and my professional background as a commercial litigation and employment attorney to offer a comprehensive and accessible analysis of the laws—legislative statutes, judicial opinions, and executive orders—that are quietly reinforcing the inequities burdening our communities. These legal frameworks, often overlooked or misunderstood, are not just abstract policies; they are the scaffolding of a system that continues to strain the moral fabric, spirit, and pocketbooks of working-class Americans.

I've spoken directly with small business owners—those who rarely make headlines, but who form the backbone of our local economies. Their stories echo the struggles my own parents faced as small business

owners decades ago. From regulatory blind spots to legislative neglect, these entrepreneurs are navigating challenges that have persisted for generations. I've combined my personal experience growing up in a small business environment with firsthand conversations to expose the systemic gaps that leave these businesses vulnerable and unsupported.

While I'm not a healthcare professional, I am a trained legal analyst with expertise in examining laws and identifying the loopholes and implications within them. I know how to dissect contracts, interpret statutes, and identify the loopholes corporations exploit to sidestep accountability. Using my family's own encounters with the healthcare system as a lens, I apply common sense and legal rigor to examine why our current healthcare model is both inequitable and unsustainable for working class families. I've cited leading voices in healthcare reform—Thom Hartmann, Abdul El-Sayed, Micah Johnson, and Minnesota's State Senator John Marty—whose work has profoundly shaped my understanding of what a fair and functional healthcare system could look like. Their insights offer a roadmap for reform at both the state and federal levels—reform that could save lives and restore financial dignity to millions.

I also explore the rise of artificial intelligence, not just as a technological marvel—or something you would see out of a sci-fi novel—but as a force with profound implications for labor, opportunity, and equity. As a labor employment attorney, I bring a legal perspective to the conversation, analyzing how AI could disrupt job markets and deepen existing inequalities if left unchecked. Citing experts like Mustafa Suleyman, CEO of Microsoft AI, I lay out a framework for how we can harness AI's potential while protecting the livelihoods and aspirations of everyday Americans. The American Dream must evolve, but it must not be erased.

Let me be transparent: I write this book as a Progressive Democrat.

I believe our democratic institutions were built to serve the public good, and I believe they can again—if we're willing to confront the status quo. That means advocating for bold, progressive policies that address the affordability crisis gripping Virginia and the nation. It means rejecting complacency and demanding action.

To my Republican readers: this book is not an attack on you. It is not a personal indictment of your values or your elected officials. It is a critique of the policies and leadership choices that I believe are harming our communities, weakening our democracy, and threatening our shared future. I hold the same scrutiny toward Corporate Democrats who speak the language of inclusivity and working-class solidarity but fail to deliver meaningful change—or worse, accept money from the very corporations upholding the status quo.

This book is a call to action. It's a challenge to all of us—regardless of party—to reimagine what's possible, to reclaim the promise of democracy, and to restore faith in the American Dream.

The story of my family is like those of many families in Fairfax County and Virginia who are struggling with the rising costs of living. I recently spoke with Jane, a newly graduated teacher who majored in education and had long dreamed of returning to her hometown to teach in Fairfax County. Her goal was to empower the next generation of students in the very community that shaped her. Unfortunately, due to the high cost of housing, Jane was unable to afford living in the county and was forced to relocate outside its borders. "It's hard to teach in a county where the cost of living eats up the majority of my teaching salary," said Jane. "And the commute is too long. And if I choose to take the toll road, the out-of-pocket costs for transportation make my monthly expenses even higher."

Like many educators in Fairfax County, Jane has been priced out of living in the very community where she teaches. A study conducted

by the National Council on Teacher Quality (“NCTQ”) found that newly hired teachers in Fairfax County with a bachelor’s degree spend approximately 42% of their annual salary on rent for a one-bedroom apartment. In fact, since 2019, between 2019–2025, while home prices rose 37% and rent rose 41%, teacher salaries increased only a measly 16%. Heather Peske, President of NCTQ, emphasized that when teachers are unable to live within the school division where they work, it leads to longer commutes, reduced interaction with students and their families, and overall negative impacts on teacher well-being. These factors significantly increase the likelihood of teachers leaving the county in search of positions in other counties closer to home during a time period where we are already experiencing a shortage of teachers.

In addition to the challenges posed by the rising cost of living, it’s important to recognize that these financial pressures extend beyond households and into the realm of small business ownership—further straining working-class communities. For example, Elden Street Tea Shop, a locally owned business in Northern Virginia, has experienced a significant decline in both sales and customer foot traffic, which the owner attributes in part to the economic impact of tariffs introduced during the Trump Administration. When interviewed by CNN’s Jake Tapper about whether her customers have felt the effects of these tariffs, the shop’s owner, Rachel Rozner, responded: “We have seen a huge drop in our in person business. As you know, we are located right outside D.C., and with all of the [D.O.G.E.] federal layoffs as well as these moving tariffs, people are changing how they are spending their finances. So, we have definitely seen an impact on our business.”

And beyond tariffs, it’s important to recognize how similar financial pressures are affecting small businesses—particularly through predatory commercial rental practices. One example is Pitt Stop BBQ,

a local favorite I mentioned earlier in the book. When I spoke with the owner of this small business, she shared that the restaurant was facing challenges with its commercial landlord, who was attempting to increase the percentage of rent based on the restaurant's earnings. This practice further cuts into the business's profits and makes it increasingly difficult for this small, family-run establishment to grow and thrive.

Just as small business owners face mounting financial pressures from predatory commercial leasing practices, working-class individuals are increasingly burdened by the lack of access to affordable healthcare. This issue compounds the economic instability many families already face, leaving them vulnerable not only to financial hardship but also to serious health risks. For example, approximately 35,000 residents of Fairfax County were reported to lack health insurance in 2023. And, nearly 70% of working adults without health insurance are employed. And according to the County website, Spanish speaking individuals are among the highest group of individuals who were uninsured in Fairfax County during this time period.

These statistics reveal a troubling reality for working-class individuals, many of whom live paycheck to paycheck—struggling just to feed their families, cover transportation costs, and meet basic living expenses. For those without health insurance, a sudden illness or workplace injury can be financially devastating. Without coverage, they are often forced to take unpaid time off, while facing the full cost of medical care out-of-pocket. This combination of lost income and high healthcare expenses can quickly deplete any savings they may have, pushing families into deeper financial insecurity. When routine medical care becomes a luxury rather than a basic human right, preventable conditions go untreated, emergencies become more costly, and the health and stability of our workforce are put at serious risk. In Fairfax County, it is our working-class residents who are most in need

of support—they must not be overlooked.

While topics such as the cost of living, transportation expenses, tariffs, predatory commercial leasing practices, and healthcare may seem unrelated at first glance, they are deeply interconnected. Together, they form a web of economic pressures that prevent working-class Virginians—and Americans more broadly—from advancing and achieving long-term stability and wealth for their progeny.

These are the kinds of stories I've lived—and they are the same stories being lived every day by my fellow Virginians and countless Americans across the country. They reflect the shared struggles of working-class families navigating rising costs, limited access to opportunity, and systemic barriers. These stories matter. They are real, they are urgent, and they must be heard.

And now, new challenges are emerging. The unchecked rise of artificial intelligence threatens to displace millions of jobs, disproportionately impacting working-class families. In Virginia, right-to-work laws further weaken the ability of workers to organize and advocate for fair treatment, leaving them vulnerable to job loss, decreased wages, and economic insecurity. Without thoughtful regulation, strategic investment, workforce training, and the repeal of anti-labor laws, we risk an unemployment crisis that could devastate communities and further erode access to opportunity.

Environmental sustainability is also essential to this vision. Climate change is no longer a distant threat—it is a present crisis. Hurricanes, wildfires, and floods are devastating communities across the country. We must enact bold climate policies, invest in sustainable infrastructure, renewable, clean energy, and support regenerative agricultural practices that restore ecosystems and build resilient local economies. A healthy environment is not separate from the American Dream—it is foundational to it.

We are all navigating these challenges side by side. And it is through collective action and thoughtful policy that we must begin to ease these burdens, so that working-class communities can thrive and build a better future for their children—just as previous generations did for us.

But meaningful change cannot happen without strong democratic institutions and elected officials who are committed to serving the public good. The urgency to act could not be greater. We are witnessing the downfall of the very foundation of our democracy—one that was meant to reflect the will of the people, not just the interests of the wealthiest few. Voter suppression laws are being enacted and upheld across the country. Gerrymandering has become a strategic tool used by both parties, distorting representation and allowing politicians to choose their voters instead of voters choosing their leaders.

As of this writing, we are currently facing a presidency marked by executive overreach, where powers constitutionally reserved for the legislative and judicial branches are being undermined. At the same time, culture wars targeting communities of color and the LGBTQ+ community threaten to roll back decades of progress. In the Senate, a majority of Republican senators represent only a fraction of the U.S. population, raising serious questions about the fairness and functionality of our representative system.

This erosion of democratic norms makes it increasingly difficult to address the pressing issues facing working-class Americans—especially the rising cost of living, stagnant wages, and lack of access to basic services. For many Virginians and Americans across the country, the American Dream is slipping further out of reach. Right now, democracy itself feels fragile.

I believe in the possibility of a resurgence—a renewed commitment to the American Dream, to democracy, and to the rule of law. Without

these pillars, hope fades. And without hope, the dream of a better life for our children—a life with affordable housing, healthcare, transportation, and a healthy environment—becomes impossible. We must act now to restore faith in our institutions and build a future that reflects the values we were promised. These are the dreams that I have for my son.