

Fairfield native on White House panel

By NICOLE HESTER-WILLIAMS Ledger staff writer | Aug 12, 2015

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Courtesy of: Ports Bishop Ari Berman

“You write these books for years, and you never know if anyone’s going to read them. I was kind of living the dream — for a day, at least,” author and political correspondent for The Nation, Ari Berman described his experience as a one of five guest panelists commemorating the 50th anniversary of the 1965 Voting Rights Act Thursday at the White House.

However, Berman, a 2000 graduate of Maharishi School of the Age of Enlightenment, has actually been “living the dream” since he graduated from Northwestern’s Medill School of Journalism in 2004.

The author of “Herding Donkeys,” and his recently released “Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America,” which outlines modern voting struggles since 1965, Berman has also written extensively about American politics and foreign policy for publications, such as the New York Times, Rolling Stone and the Guardian.

Berman appears regularly as a guest political commentator for MSNBC, NPR and CSPAN.

Fittingly, Berman's newest title was released earlier this month, just in time for the voting right's anniversary.

"I heard that the president was going to do something like this, and people were telling me that I should try to get myself invited in my capacity as an author," Berman said, adding that he later received a phone call requesting his presence at the event.

However, Berman had no idea the president would be in attendance.

"They said the president would be speaking first in the Oval Office, and we were just going to be speaking afterward in the old executive office building," Berman said. "We were just sitting in the auditorium for the live stream to start, when 10 secret servicemen came into the room and started moving things around, [President Barack Obama] just walked in and said, 'hey guys.' I was sitting in the second row."

Civil Rights champion Congressman John Lewis and U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch also spoke during the event.

Berman, who was the first panel speaker, spoke about the challenges of living in today's voting rights era.

"I spoke about the current landscape on voting rights and the current attack on the right to vote and why there's been an attack," Berman said. "There have been a variety of things making it harder to vote, such as shutting down voter registration; purging voter poles; preventing felons from voting; requiring strict forms of government identification — these are things that have really proliferated in recent years that haven't been needed before."

Berman said he felt the recent voting mandates are "a reaction to the progress we are making as a country."

Berman, who is an investigative journalism fellow at The Nation Institute, said his interest in politics started early.

"My parents weren't really that political, but growing up, my best friend's parents used to get Rolling Stone and I would read the political articles," Berman said, adding that as he got older he became increasingly interested in the world and what happened to it.

"I wanted to be a writer, but I didn't know exactly what kind of writer. I was interested in politics and in the political dimensions of Iowa. By my freshman year of college, there was the Florida 2000 elections, then 9-11, and the next year was the war in Iraq ... one thing after another, I became a lot more political," Berman said. "I thought the press did a very bad job covering the war in Iraq. They didn't ask many of the tough questions."

Best selling author David Sirota called Berman "one of the best writers around today."

However, despite his many successes, Berman said he still feels very much connected to the community of 10,000 where he grew up.

“I have a lot of friends and fans in Fairfield,” he said, adding that the community had been supportive.

“Even if you leave, you’re always connected to it,” Berman said. “A lot of my friends who were at the book launch were from Fairfield — Fairfield goes everywhere.”