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NYC's Innovation Director Has a Mission to Fight Inequality

By Samantha Cole

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"I'm a problem solver at the core," New York City Innovation Director Jeff Merritt told me following a talk at the Smart Cities NYC conference last week. And he believes government is a major part of the solution, not the problem.

"I've always felt that if you're going to solve big problems, you have to focus on government, because its whole reason for existence is to aggregate resources and take on things that otherwise wouldn't get accomplished," he said.

His career's taken him from international democracy work in the Balkans, to good government work in New Jersey. He founded Grassroots Initiative, which focuses on getting traditionally marginalized communities into public service, and ran the first online public elections in US history for New York City school board elections.

Merritt joined Bill de Blasio's team in 2011, where he helped create the the Mayor's Office of Technology and Innovation in 2014. He recently shared with Motherboard how smart cities can transform our futures—but only if we can raise everyone up together.

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Motherboard: You’ve worked on a wide variety of projects in your career. What’s the one that stands out as being closest to your heart?

Jeff Merritt: The different experiences... they’re different, right? So if I was to say one thing that pulled on my heartstrings, back in 2006 we elected the first Sikhs in New York. They’re an immigrant community that’s very large in New York. They come from India and the men wear turbans, and were heavily, heavily persecuted, especially after 9/11, because people thought because they wear turbans, they must be Muslims, and terrorists.

We worked with the leaders there to get them elected to some basic party positions. I thought it was so important, because it was about people that live in New York, and really gave me the chance to dive in deep to the culture, the fabric, and see how we can really affect the lives in New York. It was about educating people about their neighbors, and breaking down barriers. Now, for somebody who’s Sikh and runs for office, it’s not a big deal.

The reason I started out by saying they’re all very different, is because.... Take the roll out of LinkNYC [*Editor’s note: LinkNYC is New York City’s privately-run, free public WiFi kiosk program that began in 2016, but it has been gripped by several controversies*]. I’m really really proud of and spent a lot of time and energy to make that happen, but it’s a very different thing. Yes we built a piece of technology that never existed before, we changed the landscape of New York, hopefully we’re improving lives, but it’s different.

What’s a normal workday look like for you?

In some ways, part of my value is now that I’ve been with the city for a while, I understand the complexity, I understand how to get things done. And part of I think what I need to do is sort of keep my ear to the ground and look for opportunities.

I think the reason that is so important is that the rapid pace of technological change... There's enormous pressure to move rapidly into the future, but we also have to remember that we have a very special responsibility as public servants to represent all of the public and to think about the consequences of our decisions.

Things like smart cities can be very appealing, but what are the sacrifices we're making? As we deploy more and more technologies, is individual privacy compromised in some way, or are we opening up more security risks? As the workforce changes, what is the impact of that on lives?

It's a very interesting sort of tug of war, where we want to make sure we're moving fast but want to most importantly make sure we're being strategic and thoughtful along the way. I think a lot of my work is helping agencies as they're thinking through those challenges, and helping them plan in a way that is really strategic and will generate results not only in the days and weeks and months ahead, but ideally in the years ahead too.

I recently attended one of the Urban Tech events where you spoke. You mentioned navigating giving attention to larger multinational companies and also the little guys—how do you look out for both?

I like capitalism when it works and it's competitive. When there's healthy market competition, everybody wins. It's less about the "big guys" or the "little guys," but that we as the government want to see the full fleet of options. We want the best product and the best companies to succeed and that's who we want to partner with. So that came up in the context of the marketplace tool, Marketplace.NYC. With Marketplace, we create a catalog of products that is uniform, that the companies keep up-to-date and put their best foot forward. It's a level playing field, every product has a template to present themselves. It's a win-win. It helps the companies put themselves get right out in front of government, and it helps [the government] become informed, educated consumers. So that was the logic there.

What's the most exciting thing you see coming on the horizon?

I think what we're doing in Brownsville, Brooklyn with our neighborhood innovation labs is what all government needs to do. We're working in Brownsville, which is one of the poorest, crime-ridden, challenged communities in terms of every single indicator. *[Editor's note: Brownsville was chosen as the first NYC "Neighborhood Innovation Lab" community, a "tech equity initiative brings together community members, government, educators, and tech companies to help address neighborhood concerns with cutting-edge technologies," according to the mayor's office website, where you can read more about the initiative.]*

"If we in government are not actively fighting inequality, we're ultimately creating more inequality."

That community is so important because if we in government are not actively fighting inequality, we're ultimately creating more inequality. What I mean by that is, there are neighborhoods in the city and advocates in New York that are advocates for technology and want to bring in smart technology to their community and want to take advantage of all the opportunities provided there. And then there are communities that are actively pushing back against that, and are resistant, and are fearful of the government or private sector overstepping or invading personal privacy.

That's a really dangerous situation, because it means some communities are moving quickly into the future and others are falling further behind. What we're doing in Brownsville is focusing in communities where the technologies can have the greatest impact, and really doing heavy, heavy community engagement—and I don't mean that just from a jargony term. I mean working day in and out with community leaders to help them understand the complexity of data privacy, helping them understand the power of data and these new technologies. And creating advocates for technology, and informed educated consumers who want to engage in these discussions.

If we can begin to transform that dynamic for communities like Brownsville, we've dramatically changed the future state of places like New York. We move toward the kind of future we all want: An equitable future where all New Yorkers are rising up together.

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