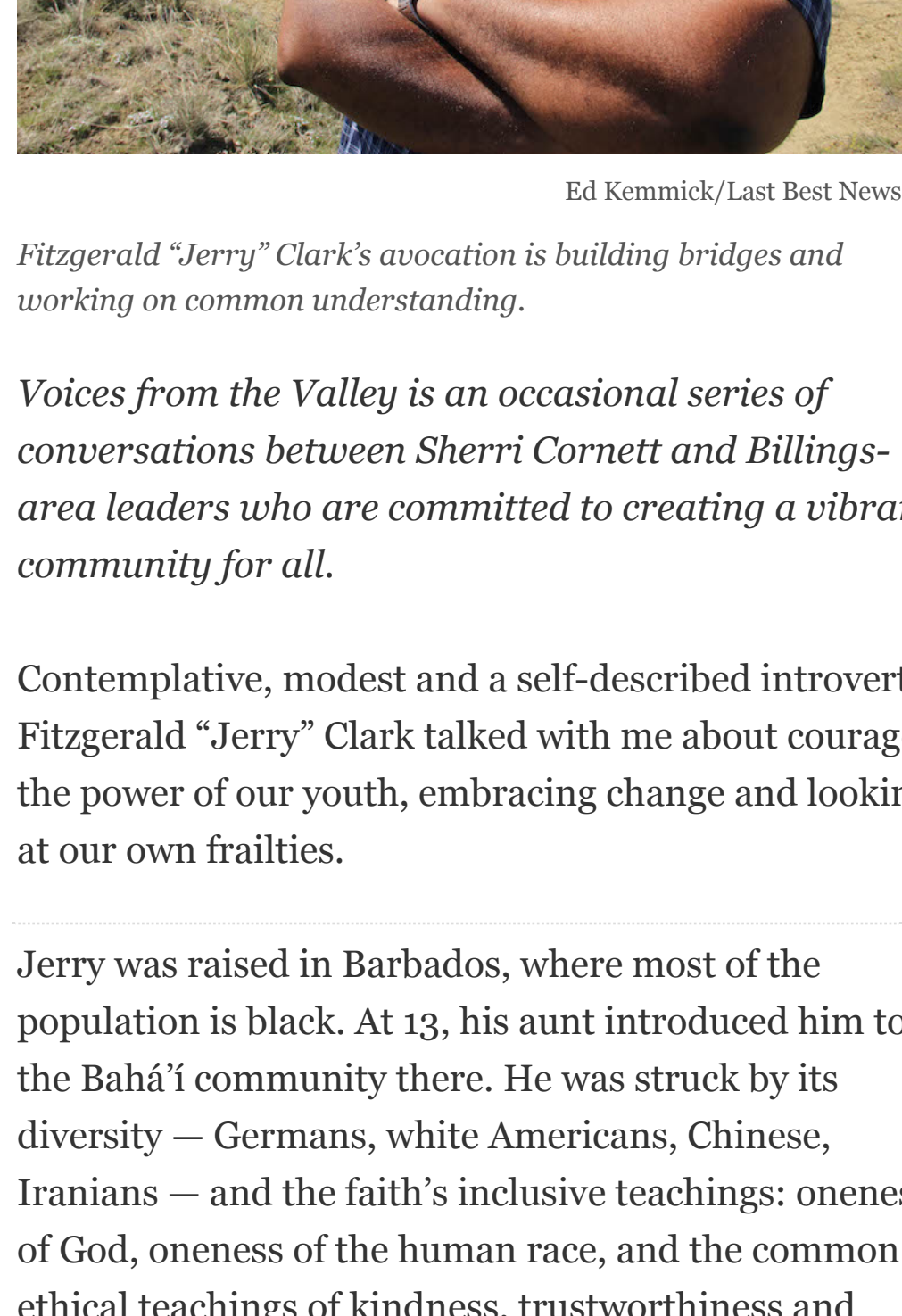


Voices from the Valley: Fitzgerald Clark

By: **SHERRI CORNETT** | April 30, 2018



Ed Kemmick/Last Best News

Fitzgerald "Jerry" Clark's avocation is building bridges and working on common understanding.

Voices from the Valley is an occasional series of conversations between Sherri Cornett and Billings-area leaders who are committed to creating a vibrant community for all.

Contemplative, modest and a self-described introvert ... Fitzgerald "Jerry" Clark talked with me about courage, the power of our youth, embracing change and looking at our own frailties.

Jerry was raised in Barbados, where most of the population is black. At 13, his aunt introduced him to the Bahá'í community there. He was struck by its diversity — Germans, white Americans, Chinese, Iranians — and the faith's inclusive teachings: oneness of God, oneness of the human race, and the common ethical teachings of kindness, trustworthiness and honesty.

Now in Billings, he works as a prevention health specialist at RiverStone Health and a member of the Spiritual Assembly of Bahá'í of Billings and the Regional Baha'i Council for the Northern Plains States. He also leads, supports and volunteers at many organizations and events geared toward building common understanding.

Sherri: Jerry, as a board member of Not In Our Town Billings, you have been called upon often to address the uptick in hate activities and the efforts by white supremacy groups to recruit our youth. What message do you try to get across?

Jerry: We need to have moral and spiritual courage, to not shirk from our responsibility of what it means to love and to be our brother's keeper. As parents and educators, we need to train our youth in critical thinking, and expose them to ethical practices and experiences that strengthen their understanding of the oneness of the human race.

Sherri: And now we have more children, more high school students publicly expressing their views.

Jerry: Yes! Many of us forget how young our Founding Fathers were. More people, particularly younger people, are becoming consciously engaged in making Billings a better place to live. They are stepping up to be leaders, running for office. They are organizing in groups and saying, "I don't like the way things are going and I want to do something about it." This is so encouraging!

Sherri: Does this come into the discussions you have with the youth group you facilitate?

Jerry: Yes. I try to remember that our life experiences shape the way we think, but younger people don't have as many experiences. This allows them to think outside the box. With them, I give examples of people who have pushed against incredible odds. I remind them of their boundless potentiality and how change is a natural and important part of the world.

Sherri: Recent changes, or change in general, seem to frighten some people.

Jerry: To avoid change is short-sighted and erroneous. The world is constantly changing. We live in 2018. In 1860, slavery in the U.S. still existed. In 1900, women didn't have the right to vote. We have a long way to go and change will continue.

Sherri: How do you encourage people to look at change in a more positive way?

Jerry: In general, I ask them what is important to them and what they see as issues, and I listen to them. And then talk about how this is our world, not just one group's world. We all have a responsibility and the means to make it grow in positive ways.

I was raised to believe I could do anything. My grandmother said, "There is no such thing as the word *can't*." Things might be hard, but they should still be done. I encourage people to do their part and ask for help if they need it.

Sherri: Getting to an "our world" not a "my world" place can be challenging when so much attention is paid to divisiveness. It's a messy prospect, isn't it?

Jerry: We need to be comfortable being uncomfortable and that starts with being comfortable with who you are. Whenever I find myself being defensive, being presented with information or feedback that is uncomfortable, I first ask myself, "Is it true? Does what they are telling me have merit?"

Then I can lay out how I feel about it. Our feelings may be negative about the feedback, but we cannot move forward until we know why we feel that way. It might just be a different way of looking at something, the way we were raised, our different experiences. We each have work to do to become better people. None of us is perfect.

Sherri: Looking at the ways we may need to change our perspectives is another form of courage.

Jerry: Everything requires a vision, a desire, and then the intelligence to bring it into being. We may never see the fruits of our actions in our lifetime, but it is still important to do them. The things I do and think and the choices I make determine who I am. Decide who you want to be and then become it.



With degrees in political science and art and a long history of advocacy work, Sherri Cornett's passion for dialogue and community has found outlets in the national and international social-justice-themed exhibitions she curates, her own art and the organizations and causes into which she contributes her energy and leadership. After 14 moves, Cornett finally found her home in Billings in 1993. www.sherricornett.com.