

## Festival of Ideas

**Andrea Elliott**

**In conversation with Andrew Kelly**

**Andrew Kelly:** Hello, and welcome to Bristol Ideas. I'm Andrew Kelly. Andrea Elliott is an award-winning investigative reporter for the *New York Times*. Her awards include the Pulitzer Prize. Her first book is *Invisible Child: Poverty, Survival, and Hope in an America City*. Lucy Scholes in the *Financial Times* said about *Invisible Child*, 'I defy anyone to read this indelible, virtuosic portrait of contemporary America and not be moved to tears, enraged, but perhaps most of all to be left feeling deeply ashamed.' Thank you, Andrea, for joining us today.

**Andrea Elliott:** Thank you, Andrew, for having me.

**Andrew:** That quote by Lucy Scholes in the *Financial Times*, I have to say, summed up pretty much how I felt about the book. We rarely get this view of poverty, a personal view of poverty, especially from the view of a child.

**Andrea:** This is true. Part of what made me want to seek out this story was the feeling that, or the reality, truly, that children don't get heard. They don't have the power of adults, nor the agency. And what we see is that because they don't vote, because they don't have the lobbying power behind them that, for instance, older people have in the United States, politicians tend to be focused much more on that population and children remain on the fringes. I think their reality needs to be heard, especially the one in seven children that are growing up poor in America today. At the time that I met Dasani in 2012 it was one in five, and I do think we're going to see those numbers going back up again unfortunately, with the eviction moratoriums being lifted after the pandemic. So, this is one of the greatest superpowers in the world, the wealthiest nation in the world arguably, depending on the measure, and we have the

highest child poverty rate of any developed nation aside from Romania. It's astounding.

And yet this is a corner that is rarely heard from. When people talk about poverty in the United States it tends to be very politicised conversations centering on the adults who are poor, and either they are blamed for their condition, or they are used as examples of a systemic failure. And those are the general ideas around poverty – you can either criminalise it or blame it or punish it or you should use it as a reason to change life in America. And that becomes a very heated debate. But the fact of the matter is, no matter where you are politically, you can't deny that there are more than 10 million children growing up poor in this country right now. And they had nothing to do with their lot, they simply are. And so that was my hope, to get inside the life and world of one child and to experience it from her perspective.

**Andrew:** It's interesting you point out about who politicians listen to. It's the same here in fact, they listen to the people who vote. And the older generation does seem to have that sway here as well. Let's talk about the child you focus on, but also about the family as well. You've been following this child into adulthood, and the family, for eight years now.

**Andrea:** Yes, I followed them for eight years. And what I would love to say first about them is that while I set out to write about a child and was very focused on this idea that we were going to tune out all of the adults the way that Charlie Brown does, where they were just 'wah-wah' in the background and all you really are focused on is the kid, what I came to realise with this child in particular and her family – seven siblings, two parents who are married, living all of them in one room crammed in this homeless shelter that was overrun by mice, and yet they were just surviving together and so resilient in so many ways, and it was a family that was very deeply connected and had an incredible bond – is that it was vital to understand, and in

order to tell Dasani's story, I needed to reckon with the former children that were still inside her parents, that there were many childhoods to write about here, and that these childhoods over time, over generations were very, very integral to the story.

Dasani is the second oldest but really the person who was the third parent. She was the leader of the siblings, and she served as a third parent, and she had great burdens. And yet she also was this kid who was just always pushing for something greater. She was driven by aspiration. And the contrast between those two realities really struck me – what she had to deal with and what she dreamt of having that was different from what she had to deal with. And so, she was on the honour roll, she was the fastest sprinter on her block, she was always calling attention and charming people and seemed like she had a star on her head, as my grandmother would have put it, a star on her head. I do believe she had a star on her head, which is to say that she looked like one of those children who was going to break out of this impossible set of circumstances and make a better life for herself. And that is a classic American story that we love to celebrate – the child who gets out and makes it.

But what I think you see with Dasani's story, and as I followed her all these years what became so apparent, is that that is a bit of a myth. For the tiny percentage of children who do make it out, there are so many more who cannot, who are just as capable, just as talented. When you look at that fact, you have to then wrestle with the truth, which is that the barriers to success are much greater than any one child's potential. And I do think that's what Dasani's story shows.

**Andrew:** You mentioned about the 'many childhoods' going back generations. You set Dasani's story in the context of the people who came before in the family, going right back to the time of a member of her family being enslaved.

**Andrea:** This was a very important thing for me to understand better – the history of this family and how that history reflected greater history and greater truths about America, because it was always in our conversations. This was something that was so important to Dasani’s parents. They brought it up all the time with me. They wanted me to feel how present for them the history of slavery in America was. It wasn't a closed chapter. And that incentivised me to really figure out who their ancestors were, and this required a lot of work, a lot of digging. I hired a genealogist who was wonderful... [but] it is not easy to find this because Black people in America prior to slavery ending were considered or treated, in terms of historical documents, as property. And so, the only way to figure out who anyone was to look at property records, to look at wills, to look at estate records, which is just so chilling. But we did and we were able to confidently link Dasani’s life to a lineage that went back many generations to her great-grandfather's great-great-grandfather, who was a man named David who had been enslaved, he'd been born into slavery, and so I sort of pieced that together.

And then the story picks up with her great-grandfather June, who is the first of many generations to leave the South, to leave the Jim Crow South and the very, very limited life by virtue of incredible structural racism that was playing out every day there, to go into a better life by going abroad, basically. His ticket out was the military. He went to Italy to fight in a segregated unit against totalitarianism and then returned with three bronze service stars in the '40s to an America that still denied him very basic rights, from voting, to the ability to buy a home, to being able to get a mortgage from a bank to start a business. And these were all things that he should have gotten a faster path into given that he was a veteran. There was an incredible amount of support given to veterans after World War Two through the GI Bill, which was credited with laying the foundations of the American middle-class. We saw the growth of the suburbs in this

period of the '50s. June Sykes was not able to join that outflow from the cities into the suburbs because of restrictive covenants that kept Black people out. He was also trained as a mechanic. This was a time when labour unions were closed to Black workers for the most part....

At times, he was working five jobs at once, and he had over 30 employers from the time that he landed in Brooklyn until his death. And in that period, what he earned compared to what he would have earned, had he been allowed to work in his chosen profession, amounted to almost \$200,000 in lost earnings.

And so I think that these things are very important when it comes to understanding Dasani's present circumstances, her current poverty... people tend to dismiss homelessness as a temporary thing or as the result of poor choices by parents or great dysfunction. I think the fact that Black Americans are twice as likely to be homeless is definitely something that connects to this history. By the same token, the fact that white Americans have amassed 10 times the median net wealth of Black Americans is very connected to real estate and to what happened in the '50s and to the intergenerational wealth that got passed down generation to generation, which is a private safety net. We always talk about the safety net and is the safety net enough – it isn't. It's a very weak safety net at this point in America. But it is much stronger for white families in a private sense, because that wealth has been created by virtue of doors that were opened for them and that were closed to Black Americans. So I think that's all a very, very important part of understanding Dasani's story.

**Andrew:** I thought the way you did that in the book was quite brilliant... you showed us where Dasani's inheritance comes from. You talk about the family now, and these quite remarkable people you talk about, you can't not be impressed, and saddened for them really with more contemporary problems, the mother being addicted to opioids, for example, and the difficulties of finding work and the

very basics of a decent life in a city – housing, work, access, community and so on.

**Andrea:** It began as a series that ran in the *New York Times* and then continued. At that point, by the way, when it ran, I thought that I had just scratched the surface, but it was 30,000 words long and it was the longest investigative project that had run in the history of the newspaper. And yet it still felt so incomplete. Part of that was because every time the family would encounter a new problem, I was introduced to another layer of their story that involved not just government policy but also history, and also just the kind of human experience of encountering that problem. And walking alongside them, standing in line in the welfare office, watching them get turned away from their shelter because they'd missed the curfew, those things were very important.

One thing I would love to highlight is, you were reading from the amazing review that the *FT* ran earlier, and yes, I do think people come away feeling disturbed and sad, but there is a lot of joy in this book and humour... this is what I felt when I was with them. I never really wanted to wrap it up. I've never stopped being fascinated by their story. And yes, they are remarkable people, that's another part of it for sure.

But I think the moments of light are almost greater than the moments of dark. And I think that there is just a way in which the reader comes to connect so deeply, I hope, with Dasani, that then Dasani's problems become the reader's problems. This is sort of the way in which I force the reader to eat some of the spinach of policy, I do it through her. It's sort of like I slip it in. But it is important that you have the context. It can't just be Dasani's life absent this broader situating of her in this broader world. It is a lot and I remember just about two years in thinking, this book is about everything, I don't know if I can do it. It says so many things at once. It could be just a book about education, it could be just a book about the safety net, it

could be a book that is only about how to define success and transcend poverty or not. There are so many ways to talk about her life. So I just allow the story to show me where I should go. I allow her life to be the guideposts in terms of when to dip into this part of history or that part of government policy and when to pull back. She was very instrumental in that by the way. I could give you an example if you want.

**Andrew:** Please do, yes.

**Andrea:** Almost at the very beginning of the book is something that I really love, which is a map of New York City. And it's an important map because it's the alternate map that is a part of New York that tourists never see. When tourists come to New York, they have the Empire State Building and all the markers, the different boroughs – there are five boroughs of New York – all on this map that everyone agrees is New York City. But if you're Dasani, you do not identify New York as carved up by boroughs so much as experiences. This map shows it. The Bronx she identifies with homelessness, because that's the intake office. Queens is welfare because that's where the office is where you stand in line. Brooklyn is Child Protective Services. The same markers are on the map that's in the book, by the way, the Empire State Building, all the other things, but you see this world the way she sees it, this city as defined by her. And it's quite granular, because it looks very closely at Fort Greene, which is a very important thing to talk about when we're talking about cities. And I know that that's a focus of yours, and what's happening to the modern city not just in America but elsewhere. And one very clear trend is that wealth has returned to the city, that people who thought the life was in the suburbs, their offspring and generations forward have decided that isn't the life, that it's better, it's more economical, it's a better life to live in close proximity to other people, especially if there are parks, like London provides, and decent transportation, that it's a better experience culturally, that you have

exposure to the arts. There are all these reasons people have returned to living in cities.

And that return can be summarised in different ways. It can be called revitalisation, it can be called gentrification, which is a slightly negative term, but it is a fact. And what we see in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, is that this is one of the gems of gentrification. Brooklyn became a kind of global model of gentrification, an emblem. It became a brand, a global brand in terms of food, in terms of fashion, since the early 2000s. And what was also in Brooklyn was deep poverty. And the two began to meet in ways that they had not for decades.

What I mean by that is when the book begins, Dasani's growing up in a shelter just blocks from these townhouses that are worth millions. And she's seeing into this world that isn't hers but it's right in front of her. So it's both catalysing, it's inspiring, and it's also frustrating. And the way that world sees her was also of great interest to me. The new homeowners, the majority of whom were white and wealthy, far wealthier than Dasani, how did they see her? Maybe they didn't see her. But what they knew, possibly, was that there was a homeless shelter in the neighbourhood. And definitely the view when it comes to homeless shelters is that this is a transient and troubling population, you hope they sort of go away, they don't really belong, they're just there for shelter. But the truth about Dasani is that she belonged in that neighbourhood, that she had a greater claim historically to that neighbourhood than almost anyone, because she went back generations, to her great-grandfather, right in that very small neighbourhood of Fort Greene in Brooklyn. There are just a lot of shades to every single topic that the book tries to tackle. And you can see it from hopefully different perspectives. You can try to encounter Dasani as the person who has come into the neighbourhood when you're reading this book, as much as you could relate to her experience if you are in her population, I would hope.



**Andrew:** I'm glad you said all those things because they are points I wanted to bring out and I will do slightly later for some of them. But I think the point you make about the joy in the book is critical, because it does come through in terms of the life and what takes place. And I'm glad you talked about the child's view of the city - or how someone else perceives the city - because too often we miss that viewpoint as well. And it's something that we're looking to do in projects coming up, looking particularly at children and cities, and we can use your book as an example of that.

I want to ask you about the housing position, because we often see television programmes about the projects and so on, dramas and documentaries. This really wasn't a nice place to live, was it? Not just in terms of some of the things you've talked about, but you mention that Dasani has to rush down to the kitchen in the morning to get one of only two microwaves to use before other people come and use them, just to get basic food done for the family. And similarly the staff failing to notify police of sexual assaults in the building and so on.

**Andrea:** Auburn Family Residence, the shelter where she lived for almost a quarter of her childhood by the time I met her, was a horrific place. It was actually closed to children after my series ran. She had already moved out by then to another shelter. But it was a place that was almost Dickensian in its horrors. What's interesting when you bring up the projects is that I do think, for people who haven't really lived in that world or haven't really struggled with poverty, that there is an understandable notion of there's a distance between them and that life, and there is a kind of way that people will sort of lump it all together, like it's just 'the projects'. But what's so fascinating to me about being inside it – literally her shelter was in between two projects – was to see the hierarchy that exists even in the worst corner of Fort Greene, Brooklyn. Worst meaning the poorest, and probably the most subject to gun violence and other

problems and drug addiction. So there was a real hierarchy, and I think this is just a human tendency to order the people around you according to what they have. And I think that to Dasani, it would have been the greatest thing for her family to have secure housing in the projects because they would have had access to a kitchen and her father loved to cook, and this would have meant that they would have been eating better, and they wouldn't have been constantly living in fear of being uprooted, or being uprooted and then the serial displacement and trauma that comes with that being a part of their reality was just so hard for Dasani. So I think that to her, it would have been great to enter into the upper echelon of that part of her neighbourhood. So it's something to wrestle with.

But I will also point out that when we talk about housing and the problem of homelessness in America, public housing, which is the projects – and there are vouchers also that help people live almost rent free – those federal programmes only help about three per cent of Americans. It may be suboptimal – a lot of people would argue that this is not the way to live – but it is the only thing that's available and it's so scarcely available. I think that is really where my focus is more when it comes to understanding the homeless problem. Not the conditions of the projects but why isn't there a greater attempt nationally to shore up people who cannot live on the wages that they're earning at the same time as rent and it just becomes impossible? This is why we see that there is such a crisis of homelessness in this country, because it's just become really, really difficult to find affordable housing. And that differs from state to state and city to city. It looks different in different places.

**Andrew:** I want to move on to education. Dasani's mother is very keen on her getting an education, and she does come across in her schools some very good teachers, I thought, helpful teachers, supportive teachers who saw something in her.

**Andrea:** Education was so much more than education for Dasani. It was physically a shelter, a second home, the public school system... At the time that I met her, the only place she had a closet was in her classroom... It's hard to imagine for a lot of people what it's like to not have a closet, where literally your clothes are stacked in corners. It was the provider, her school, of three meals a day if needed, of medical care, of surrogate parenting, of stability of routine, of something you can count on every single day, which made the end of the school year very painful, to say goodbye to that. And even though summer school was there, and there was a summer meal programme available, it was the absence of those teachers that she bonded with that was a really difficult thing to absorb. So I would argue that what I saw, in terms of education and its role in Dasani's life, was the greatest anti-poverty programme that exists in America. And that's also an unfair burden for educators to carry. Because they're doing so much more. They have to do so much more before they can even begin to teach effectively. You can't teach a child who's hungry. You can't expect a child who has not slept properly to be awake in class, or who doesn't have a desk to write on at home or proper lighting or access to a computer to succeed at homework. It's just an incredible challenge. I think that the teachers and the principals and social workers in those schools that I witnessed over the years I was with this family are the people most on the frontlines of the problems that Dasani represents. They're on the frontlines, and they are really heroic, I think. I've never been much of a believer in clear villains and clear heroes or a binary view of things, I always reach for the complexity of any situation. Nobody is perfect. And Dasani had a lot of struggles in these schools as well. But I can't imagine what her life would have been like without them.

Her mother wanted her to succeed. Her mother, Chanel, was someone who suffered a lot as a child, who had access to great education, who had moments of childhood that were very stable

because she was in a home that was of better means – it was her godmother’s home, she took her in – but then at times was also homeless and with her biological mother, who was addicted to drugs. And Chanel just really, really toggled between these two worlds and struggled and dropped out in the ninth grade or didn't achieve more than a ninth-grade education, I should say. She was maybe in and out of school a little longer than that. She is a classic example of someone with a very high IQ, who's an excellent reader, who has a great mind, who loved to debate with me everything, from policy to history, who was quick on her feet, who could hustle together a meal for her kids on demand in ways that were astonishing to me, they involved incredible feats of creativity. And yet she was lacking a high school diploma and that just closed off a lot of avenues for her. I think she wanted to see her children do better. I know she did. As did her husband, Supreme, Dasani’s stepfather, who Dasani considered her father. And yet what that entailed for Dasani was leaving her home and going to a private boarding school, which was a great opportunity that her public school in New York City made possible. Her principal really believed in Dasani, and she sought this opportunity out, and Dasani went to the school in rural Pennsylvania in a very different place, predominantly white town. And there, I think, is where she faced her greatest test of... her greatest choice, I would say, between this other life she could have and returning to the place that felt most authentic to her and close to her heart and she had to choose between those.

**Andrew:** This was the Milton Hershey School, which came from the chocolate manufacturer?

**Andrea:** Yes. So it's very similar to the Cadbury family...Milton Hershey looked at the Cadbury example as his own model, and he was the Henry Ford of chocolate...He created mass-produced milk chocolate so it had a shelf life and he made a fortune, didn't have

children, and gave his fortune to the creation of a school for orphans. In the beginning it was for boys, but it wound up expanding to include all kids. And the only way you get in is if you're poor, so it is a school that seeks to rescue children from poverty. And it's a fascinating place because it's in his town – just like the Cadbury town – it's called Hershey. And this is a town that he built in his vision, with parks and a library and the school that he built and trolleys for his employees who worked in the factory. And what you see now is around 2,000 students who live in these....

it's a kind of fascinating experiment in a way. They live in homes with real married couples. There are 12 children per home and those married couples act as their surrogate parents, and they take them to piano lessons and to meets of athletic games and they help tutor them or they help them with their homework, they make sure they get braces. And everything is paid for by the school, all your needs are taken care of by the school.

The experience Dasani had at first was that she was thriving. She just took off. She was making incredible advances in math, she leapt ahead by two grade levels in a period of months, she joined the track team – she'd always been a great runner. She eventually became a cheerleader. She challenged herself to step up and get everything that the school had to offer. But in her absence – and she was a very integral part of her family as we know – in her absence, her family really struggled. Her mother in particular had a harder time keeping everything together, getting the kids to school on time. And a bunch of problems happened that snowballed into a catastrophic situation where the city's child protection workers removed the children from the home on neglect accusations, not abuse. And this is a very important thing we can talk about, the difference there. But neglect is failure to provide and the parents were being accused of failing to provide adequate housing because of a rash of problems that the landlord wouldn't fix. And they were overwhelmed. And really what

they needed was help making phone calls... instead their children were removed and placed in a foster care system that was able to give them shelter but not able to replace the love they got at home, and also wound up separating the children across homes, even though they were so, so bonded.

And this all happened while Dasani was at Hershey. She hadn't been there a year when it happened. I think that it was just intolerable to her. It was not something that she could accept while continuing to perform at a high level at a school that represented leaving home and seemed to be pointing her in a different direction from home at every turn. You know, please speak differently, you need to dress differently, you cannot behave in certain ways – what Dasani called acting white. That was tolerable to her in the beginning, although I think she would have struggled with it ultimately. But it became intolerable when she started to see her own family suffering in her absence, for something she blames herself for, which is that she wasn't there. And then she's being told you need to act in a different way. It was like, you need to turn your back on your family at this time when they need you more than ever. I think that for her it wasn't even a question. Her loyalty was always going to be with her family. And so she left. And she got kicked out and she came back to New York. But that is not the end of the story.

**Andrew:** We'll come around to that... I just want to ask one final question about education because there's an irony in the book where one of the teachers who supports her most actually becomes homeless herself, doesn't she? She loses where she's living and has to move into shelter accommodation.

**Andrea:** This was one of the most stunning facts of the book, to my mind. Faith Hester was a kind of beacon in Dasani's life. She was the example of the person who gets out of the projects and makes it. She had a single mom, a Black family, she was bussed out of her predominantly Black neighbourhood into a whiter neighbourhood,

Midwood, Brooklyn, and faced a lot of racist slurs and backlash from locals but at the same time took off in that school, graduated early, went to college, wound up getting two Masters degrees. And with all of that Faith returned to her roots, became a renter in Bed-Stuy, which is near Fort Greene, another touch point of gentrification in Brooklyn – it's incredible what's happened in Bed-Stuy. And she would stand in front of the class and say, 'This is my story, and you can do it too. And by the way, it doesn't mean you have to cut ties with your roots because here I am, I've returned to help my community and you can do it too.' And then, as her neighbourhood began to change right under her feet, her landlord sold the building because he wanted to flip it for a profit, which was happening all over Bed-Stuy. And she was evicted. She didn't know what to do. She didn't have the right savings in place. It's hard to rent in New York because you have to line up money to pay the first and last deposit. And I think on a teacher's salary, she was making it work. But she didn't expect this to happen. I don't think she was prepared. I was there that day. I saw it happen. It was absolutely devastating to see her having to part with her home... she has a daughter, and the two of them leaving in a U-haul and putting everything in storage. And so, yes, they went into the shelter system.

One-third of the parents of families in the shelter system are working. This is not just the deeply poor like Dasani, it is also people like Faith Hester. And I think that was a very important story to be included in the book. But it wasn't something that Faith was sure she wanted to be made public, so I left it alone and actually wrote the book without that piece. She was still very central to the story. When I finished the book, I went to her and we talked about it. And my argument to her was, if you let people know that this happened to you, then they can no longer just say it's the families like Dasani. This actually is so shocking, right? But it's more common than you think. And she agreed with that. And she very bravely decided, and I hope

that she will continue to tell her own story, but she decided to include it.

After a year, by the way, in the shelter system...She didn't want to rent again because she never wanted to give anyone that power over her life. And so she saved up enough to be able to put a down payment on a place in the Bronx, which is the most accessible kind of real estate to people who don't have a lot of money in New York City. It's one of the best markets. So she was able to become a homeowner. And I'm really proud of her for doing that. I think that it was what she deserved, frankly. So she does wind up OK. But what happens with this brilliant, life-changing teacher going to the Bronx, well, it makes it hard for her to get to the school where these kids love her and need her. She has a two-hour commute, I think it's both ways, actually. So I don't know how much longer she can stick it out. And that's what you lose with the lack of affordable housing, is people like Faith Hester from the public school system.

**Andrew:** You talked then about some of the decisions to put this story in the book after obviously gaining permission. There must have been a number of ethical issues you grappled with as a journalist in dealing with this story and the long time you were on it. But one thing that stands out is the immense support that the *New York Times* gave in terms of the ability to continue an investigation in that initial programme and presumably in terms of supporting you after this as well.

**Andrea:** The *Times* was the genesis; it was where I was able to give this story life. This is a newspaper that invests in long-form journalism which is so important in investigative journalism. And so I'm eternally grateful to the paper for launching the story and being patient as I left to write this book. I will be going back very soon. And, yes, they've been supportive of the work that I'm doing. I think the response to the book that has in part shown up in the pages of the book review of the *Times* and elsewhere is more just about how



people have responded to Dasani's story, rather than the *Times* really taking a stand. But I think that this is a story that includes the *Times*. She was on the front page of the *New York Times* for five days in a row.

And you mentioned the ethics. There's no question that being on the front page of the *New York Times* five days in a row... First of all, that's just a rare thing, even for a president. It's going to have an impact on any human, especially one who had been living in such obscurity. And I think at first I wondered, where is this going to go? And is the book that I've set out to write really just going to be about the period that I followed her before she became, momentarily, a public figure? Because maybe that's where I need to focus. And so I was really focused on the history in that moment... I was following her every day, but I was thinking of the book or conceiving of it as something that was bookmarked by the period when I began and the period when the series ran. And instead what I saw was that so little changed, and at the same time, incredible things kept happening, both good and bad, that just made me want to keep reporting it. And so I think that the ethical challenge for people who are doing ethnographic work, or what I call immersion – I consider myself an immersionist. There are two things you should know about me, I'm not really a reporter, I'm an immersionist, I really immerse. I mean, it is a form of reporting, but it's not daily deadlines so much as getting as deep inside as I possibly can in order to tell the story in a vivid and authentic and what feels like the most fully realised way I can. So that's immersion. And I'm not a writer, I'm a re-writer. I really think of writing as you put something down and then that's where the work only begins. And the rewriting is very much relying on a bunch of things that I use, tools that I use to make sure that I've understood what's happening and captured it on several levels. So one is audio, one is video. I rely a lot on video because I don't trust my memory.

But the difficulty of that work is that I had to wear these two hats. One was the worker hat of 'here I am to do a job'. And one was the hat of just being a human being. And you don't take off the human hat when you're working, you just wear both hats, because you can't help but feel things. And that then creates struggles when you feel challenged or called upon to intervene. And at the same time, if you do that, how are you changing the story? Are you becoming a part of the story? And these are things I constantly wrestled with. I could not tolerate seeing the children hungry, I thought it was fine for me to bring them food. We had a very deep bond. I was close to this family. There were all kinds of ways in which I think I walked that line very carefully.

In terms of what could I have done as a reporter, or what didn't I do, I wrestle with that still every day. I think that there were things I could do in my reporting role that then created somewhat of a bomb in my human role. And so I'll give you an example. Nana, the sister of Dasani, the stepsister who is going blind because she has a genetic disease in her eye, she lost her glasses at one point. And this was a very bad thing. It meant that she was going to slide behind in school. It was not my role to take her and get her new glasses, and at the same time, I couldn't live with myself had I not helped her in some way get her vision back. And so I just thought, hey, I'm going to call her ophthalmologist and interview that person. And one call from the *New York Times* they were like, 'Oh, my God, she doesn't have glasses!' And the interview was actually helpful to the reporting as well, but it also resulted in her being taken care of.

There are things you can do. And I just think there are no easy answers to this. I think that I found greater enlightenment among academics than I did journalists around these questions. I think we still have a way to go as journalists in really wrestling with our roles. But academics – my favourite was Lee Ann Fujii, who did a lot of work as an ethnographer on the victims of genocide in places like

Rwanda and she said to me, something that has always stayed with me, is that what we have to know going into this work is that there is a built-in asymmetry of power. And don't kid yourself that it's going to disappear. It's always there. And it's built by us. We're there to do a job, we have the power, whether it's the power of telling their story, whether it's in her case economic power, because academics often provide a stipend to people they're interviewing, which is defensible because they're taking time out of their really difficult days to give Lee Ann Fujii the information she needs. But that doesn't mean that it's equal. That just means in some ways that it's less equal, that they needed the money in a sense to go to her. Journalists in the United States don't pay for stories. It corrupts the process. I believe very much in that principle. That said, and I didn't talk about this with Dasani's family, but I always knew that once the book was finished, I would donate a portion of the proceeds, if there are proceeds, I hope that there are and even if there aren't, that I would create a foundation to help families like them. There is currently a trust in place. It's on my website, it's called the Invisible Child Family Trust that people can donate to, and I also have given to. They know this now. I think that it's the right thing, but I don't think people should feel coerced in any way to participate. They need to do this from a position of agency somewhat. Of course, it's difficult with children. And that's a whole other part. Now Dasani is almost 21. So, she signed off on this book as an adult, she knows the book intimately. I read it to her, actually, over the course of five days, because I didn't think she would stick with it. It's long! So, she and her sister had to sit through five days of me reading it to them in the fact-checking process. So yes, these are difficult questions, and they're worthy ones, and it's an open conversation.

**Andrew:** I want to cover just two other areas with you. The first is about city leadership. When the articles first appeared in the *New York Times*, it prompted such a response that the family was invited

to the swearing-in ceremony of the then new mayor of New York City, Bill de Blasio. And he made all sorts of promises, didn't he? And yet in your book a few years later, he's challenged when he's in a gym by a homeless woman saying, 'you haven't delivered.' Are these problems just simply too big for city mayors to deal with, do you think?

**Andrea:** It's interesting. The series took a really hard look at the former mayor, Michael Bloomberg. And then there was a transition in power. De Blasio celebrated the series as he came into office. It very much resonated with, I think, the things that he was trying to call the public's attention to, the problems and divides of the city. I then heard Mike Bloomberg in a conference, I would say it was three years later, saying, 'If anyone thinks they have an easy answer to the homeless issue, I invite them to give it to us because it's impossible. It's so hard.' I don't think it's impossible. But I do think that it is bigger than any one leader can rally the resources to solve. With de Blasio the frustration was that the numbers were still so high, right? It's like the problem wasn't going away. But what you have to also consider is that New York City is unique because it is the only city in the country that provides year-round legal rights to shelter. So, if you can prove that you don't have anywhere else to go, then you are given a room or sometimes an apartment. And that's a costly thing. But it's a sort of form of housing in a way in the city for people who really don't have anywhere else to go. It's hard to get in and it got harder under de Blasio and that is, I think, one thing that he should be held accountable for because he was all about creating affordable housing. The affordable housing initiatives that he took on were not considered to be friendly to the poorest New Yorkers and they often involved deals with developers that did not benefit the poor and he made it harder for people to gain access to shelter. It became a sort of increasingly punitive system. But it still was there in ways that it is not in other places. What we see in New York City is unique in that

sense. But the leadership is limited because the city funding is only one piece of it. There's also the state presence and federal presence in all of these policies that the book looks at. So I think it's important to keep that in mind, that it's not something that one administration can necessarily solve. It has to be in concert with other funding streams, and even the non-profit world or potentially philanthropy....

In America, three per cent of people have access to federal housing programmes. That's not enough.

**Andrew:** That's obviously one of the possible solutions. What about some of the more radical ideas that have come forward? One of the ones that we've been working on is this idea of providing a guaranteed income. Over here, it's called a universal basic income. But in America there's the Mayors for a Guaranteed Income movement, And one of the things that's often said is one thing we should be doing is giving poor people money.

**Andrea:** We are. Right now we have this thing called the Child Tax Credit. This is what's been so interesting to me about the aftermath... we're not even 'aftermath', it's the impact of the pandemic. It's not behind us yet. But out of the pandemic came these relief initiatives that did lift a lot of Americans out of poverty. The most striking one is the Child Tax Credit, which is a temporary relief programme under Biden that could become permanent, but it hasn't so far and doesn't have the collective willpower or political backing to, I don't believe. But nonetheless in its temporary iteration it has lifted three and a half million children out of poverty every month. That is a guaranteed income. So, I think we've seen that it can work in America, and I think that had Dasani's family been able to receive it at the time that I was entering into their lives, I would have seen a very different story.

**Andrew:** Thank you, Andrea. I do urge people to read this book. We've only been able to cover a fraction of the material in it. It is a

most remarkable book. Christina Patterson, in her review for the *Sunday Times* compared this book and Andrea's work justifiably, I think, to George Orwell. It's full of lessons for New York but also for other cities as well.

*Invisible Child* is published by Hutchinson Heinemann in the United Kingdom. It was one of Barack Obama's books of 2021, a *New York Times* Top Ten book of last year, and I'm sure will be a book of the year for many here too. Thank you, Andrea Elliott, for your work and for joining us today. Thank you very much.

**Andrea:** Thank you.

*This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity. The full version of the interview is in the recording.*