

Voices from the Grassroots Oral History Project

Detroit Equity Action Lab

Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights

Wayne State University Law School

Detroit, MI

Sonja Bonnett

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER

July 18, 2019

Detroit, MI

Narrator

Sonja Bonnett was born and raised in Detroit, MI. After losing her home to an unconstitutional tax foreclosure and participating in a study about squatters conducted by Professor Bernadette Atuahene, she became involved in housing and foreclosure activism. Today, she is a Community Legal Worker for the Detroit Justice Center, which is part of the Coalition to End Unconstitutional Tax Foreclosures. In this role, she helps people appeal the tax assessment of their homes. She is the director of the Dignity Restoration Housing Program which provides homes to Detroiters who lost their homes due to unconstitutional tax foreclosure.

Interviewer

Peter Blackmer is a Research Fellow at the Detroit Equity Action Lab, an initiative of the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights at Wayne State University Law School.

Abstract

Sonja Bonnett begins the interview with a discussion of her childhood neighborhood in Detroit and her experiences with racism as a child. She recounts how her own neighborhood changed as a result of the mortgage and foreclosure crisis, how she lost her home, and how she became involved in activism. She describes how the Coalition to End Unconstitutional Tax Foreclosure brings together many housing organizations, her educational work for the Detroit Justice Center and her work as director of the Dignity Restoration Housing Program, why tax over-assessment is illegal, how water shutoffs are connected to housing, and how the legal approach of the Detroit Justice Center is different than the grassroots approaches of other groups in the Coalition. Other topics include Detroit Public Schools, how she was an advocate for kids with ADHD, gentrification and development downtown and neglect of poor neighborhoods, policing, and personal topics such as self-care, her marriage during difficult financial times, and her children. Major themes include the importance of actual members of the affected communities being part of outreach and finding solutions and why people must be brought out of crisis mode and paid for their work before they can become activists. She closes by talking about what justice looks like for foreclosure

victims, what people should do if they are facing foreclosure, and what her vision of a just Detroit looks like.

Keywords

Detroit Justice Center; Detroit Public Schools; Detroit, Michigan; Education; Foreclosure crisis; Gentrification; Housing; Policing; Water shutoffs

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Transcript of interview conducted July 18, 2019 with:

Sonja Bonnett [SB]

Detroit, MI

By: Peter Blackmer [PB]

PB: If you could just give us your name, where you live, and your organizations or affiliations.

SB: Absolutely. My name is Sonja Bonnett. I live on the West Side of Detroit [Michigan], the Cody-Rouge area. I work at the Detroit Justice Center as a Community Legal Worker, essentially a paralegal. I am the director of a program called the Dignity Restoration Housing Program and a proud member of the Coalition to End Unconstitutional Tax Foreclosure.

[0:00:31]

PB: Could you describe for us what your neighborhood and the city were like growing up?

SB: Well, the neighborhood I'm in now is not the neighborhood I grew up in. I grew up in Southwest Detroit for a good amount of time, and then I spent some time in the Wayne State area. It was difficult. I'm a biracial child, so I grew up in a Caucasian household but a poor one, and I experienced a ton of racism and hardships. My family was very heavily influenced by drugs, so I grew up very poor and very hard and very fast.

[0:01:08]

PB: How did those kinds of experiences with racism impact the way that you kinda saw the world or maybe your political consciousness?

SB: My political consciousness probably was piqued but not affected at a young age. The way I saw the world was--as far as Caucasian people are considered--was very grim because I had such horrible encounters. It wasn't until I got older and got into maybe the workforce and started seeing better people that I had some, I don't know, better feelings towards white people, even in my own home.

PB: Would you feel comfortable sharing maybe one or...one of those encounters that you had that impacted the way that you saw?

SB: A positive encounter?

PB: No, a negative one.

SB: A negative encounter? Absolutely. My mother and my sister both dated men from the South who were Caucasian, and they weren't...I guess the word would be outright racist, but any time there was a good time going on, there was alcohol flowing, the n-word would consistently be thrown around. And even at a young age, I didn't have the full definition, you'd know that that word is bad. It's a very heavy word. So that was probably my first encounters with it, and then upon going onto the block and just wanting to be a kid and play with other kids, every time my white child neighbors would get mad, they would say the n-word, and I started fighting so they wouldn't say it anymore. So yeah.

[0:02:52]

PB: Could you describe some of the ways that--I know you're in a different neighborhood now, but...

SB: Yeah.

PB: ...but the way that yo--your neighborhoods or the city have changed over the years?

SB: Yeah. The city has changed dramatically, but only downtown, really. My neighborhood is new to me. It's a West Side neighborhood, and I'm getting to why I'm in that neighborhood. I lost my home, which was on the East Side. This neighborhood is very diverse. I have white people on the block, Black people on the block, Arabs on the block, Mexicans on the block and in the surrounding areas, and it's quiet and nobody bothers anybody. So, so far a pleasant experience. I've only been there a year. The way that the city has changed is that downtown has changed. Maybe, you know, Midtown some and by Wayne State some, but *my* city hasn't changed. The ghettos haven't changed. Those are the same. Still poor, still disenfranchised, still crap education.

[0:03:54]

PB: This is probably a related question, but what do racism and white supremacy look like in Detroit today?

SB: It looks like it's increasing, but racism in Detroit is more linked to discrimination than anything else. So, it could be, you know, the fact that you get pulled over while being Black. To be--and it's not directly Detroit, but my husband was taking me to get like a...get my nails done at Fairlane Mall, which is in Dearborn [Michigan], and we got pulled over 'cause we have a small crack in our windshield, which was absolutely absurd, and I made sure to tell the officer how absurd it was. We got pulled over for being Black.

So to me, that's a good part of what racism looks like in Detroit. It's more discrimination-based. It's more hidden. Whereas in the South someone may say something directly to you, here you could go into a bar that you may not know is a [air quotes] "predominantly white" bar and just get the entire cold shoulder and, you know, kinda, okay, this is their thing. Let me step out. It's more wrapped-up like that. It's very hidden, yet very prominent, and a lot of discrimination is just in housing, with the police, with the politics, period, surrounding Detroit. The way the water goes, the way that the schools go, and the way that housing is structured, all of it is very, very racist, and it's because this city is 84, 85.3 percent Black.

[0:05:28]

PB: When was the first time that you got involved in activism or organizing work?

SB: I'd say the first time I really got involved was upon meeting Professor [Bernadette] Atuahene who had done this beautiful study on... She was doing a study, actually, on squatters in Detroit, squatter laws. And so, we have two type of squatters here. So, we have the squatter that may find an abandoned home 'cause they're homeless and move in and stay there. That's squatter number one. Squatter number two would be a person who has lost their home due to foreclosure or what have you and just didn't leave because no one bought the house or whatever other circumstances, they stayed. I was contacted by Professor Atuahene because I was in that second set of squatters. I lost my home due to foreclosure, yet I did not leave. So she called me to do what was essentially about a 30-minute interview that turned into about two days of talking, and she thought that she saw this [laughs] fight and this light in me, and, I don't know, it just spread from there. I joined the Coalition [to End Unconstitutional Tax Foreclosures], and then, you know, I haven't stopped since.

[0:06:39]

PB: Where does that fight and that light come from?

SB: Well, it came from learning that I didn't have to lose my house. It came from learning that the...it was done illegally and against the...the Constitution. I was pissed, and so that for me lit a fire, and I just didn't want it to happen to anyone else. So that's where it came from, but I think it had always been there. I had...was like an advocate for people with Detroit Public Schools who their kids would constantly get suspended for being normal little Black boys and things of that nature, but I didn't know it was there until meeting Professor Atuahene.

[0:07:18]

PB: Are there other folks in your life who have influenced that kind of perspective or that kind of work?

SB: Absolutely. My Executive Director, Amanda Alexander. Of course, Professor Bernadette Atuahene. A few people at Detroit People's Platform who work with Linda Campbell. Kia Matthews (??), Amina Kirk, Peter Hammer. There's so many people that once I got into like a circle of people who just started bringing up point after point about what was going on in my city, it really influenced me and pushed me to go further. Monica Lewis-Patrick, absolutely one of the biggest ones.

[0:07:59]

PB: I want to start getting into the housing issue.

SB: Absolutely.

PB: But kind of before the tax foreclosures, of course, there's the Great Recession and mortgage crisis. Can you talk about how those periods impacted your communities?

SB: Yes. So, I bought my house around 2009...between 2009 and 2011, and I cannot remember which one. I've talked this to death, but I can't remember, but it was in there. And so when I moved on this block, there were probably four renters on a block. Everyone else was homeowners. Everybody kept up the yard, you know, and sat on their porches. Everybody conversed. There was a park. There was basketball going on. Very community-like atmosphere. Fast forward three or four years, and it was like desolate house, abandoned house, this person lost their home to foreclosure, this person died and the person--the kids couldn't take over the mortgage, and one after the other after the other after the other, block after block after block, until it looks like it...what it looks like now.

That was the 48205 area code, which is under a few names. The Osborn community would be the appropriate one, but they also call it the Red Zone and a whole lot of other stuff because there's a lot of violence lately in the news about that area code, and it turned into that from watching those blocks go from being full of people, homeowners and kids, to being just a few house--just a few renters, just a few drug houses. And then, it was so close to Eight Mile that the drug addicts from Roseville [Michigan] and the suburbs, which were predominantly white, would come to Detroit to get high--which is that crossing right there--come here to get high and sometimes not go back, and they'd be on our corners passed out and things of that nature. So it was like the heroin--the opiate epidemic and the tax foreclosure crisis and the mortgage crisis all at once in that particular area. I don't know how it structurally went in the other neighborhoods in Detroit 'cause that's where I was, but I...I watched all of those things happen back-to-back, boom boom boom boom boom, and it was bad. It's still bad.

[0:10:15]

PB: And so if--I mean, we know the federal government had put together these funds available with the hardest-hit funds.

SB: Mmm...

PB: How--did you...how have those funds that were designed to help homeowners...homeowners during the Great Recession...

SB: Mm.

PB: ...really end up getting used in the city of Detroit?

SB: I've not seen them used in the city of Detroit, not in my...not in my experience, not in the people that I know. We're talking about the lowest-median income? No, they're not getting hardest-hit funds. They're not getting anything. They're just losing their homes, so there are probably some middle-class folks or maybe a little bit above that who have benefitted from the hardest-hit funds, but we have not.

[0:10:56]

PB: So could you tell us about buying your home and...

SB: Mmm.

PB: ...what that process was like and...

SB: Sure.

PB: ...tell us about your home and your family.

SB: Okay. So, I was buying my home through land contract because I couldn't affide--afford to buy like just right out, and my taxes were included in the payments. Let me say that first. I have a husband. We have six children together

biologically. He had one prior to our marriage. So seven kids in the house at one time, plus I have a bad habit of taking in other people's kids that are going through whatever they're going through. So you can imagine eight to ten kids in the house at the same time, all of different ages, going to college, graduating college, going to...just not going to school, every, everything, and my home was kind of a sanctuary for a lot of people that I would try and help get back on track for whatever they were going through in their lives. So, my home was important to me and to a lot of other people.

Around 2011, maybe [20]12--again, these dates may not be correct. I can't remember--I got a letter in the mail that said I owed about 5,000 dollars in back taxes. Problem with that, again, is that my taxes were included in my payments, so I reached out to the people who, you know, I was buying the house from. We had a short argument on the phone, hung up. About a week later, I got a quick deed in the mail. The house was mine, but also the debt was mine. So, I went to every outreach that I could possibly find. I went to the United Community Housing Coalition. I went to the Show Cause hearings. I went everywhere. But because I bought my home on land contract and the taxes were accrued prior to my ownership, no one could help me. So, the house was owned by the city and the land bank for a good amount of time up until 2017.

Now prior to that, every September, October--and no, we could not afford to pay the...the...those 5,000 dollars in taxes were still in my name. So, it wasn't like I could just go to the auction, buy my house back, and be okay. I still had to pay that 5,000 dollars. I could not afford that. So every September, every October, we were always up in arms that somebody was gonna buy the house. So 2017, somebody came to the door and said that they did buy the house. They didn't have any of the appropriate paperwork to prove that they had, and there's a lot of scams that happen in the...the poorest neighborhoods in Detroit where people say they bought your house, and they didn't. So we didn't believe 'em, and he stayed away for like a year. So 2018, I got an eviction notice, you know, somebody had bought the house. It did happen to be the same guy, but there was still some really fishy stuff about it, but I had to move. Luckily, at that time, I was Director of the Dignity Restoration Housing Program which gives people houses who have lost their home due to illegal foreclosure, so I was able to get the first dignity house.

But, let me back up and tell you what illegal and unconstitutional foreclosure are. So the...Michigan is unique in the fact that we have our own Constitution, and in that Constitution it says that the city can't tax you on more than 50 percent of your market value. So if your house is worth 60,000 dollars, they can tax you on 30[000], okay? The lowest-median-income people, 94 percent of us, were being taxed at 55 to 85 percent. So, that's a great deal of why people lost their homes. The second part is that Michigan--or Detroit specifically--has this thing called the Poverty Tax Exemption which means if you make less than the federal poverty line, then you're eligible to not have to pay taxes on your home. I knew nothing about this and, sad enough, even when I speak publicly today, no one knows what it is.

So, the city didn't inform me. Even when I was going to get all that help, no one ever told me about any of that. So I got the new house on the West Side, and I got it because, you know, I have this program, but had these things not been in place, I probably wouldn't be able to do this interview because I'd still be running around trying to piece my life back together, and what pisses me off the most is I didn't have to be in that position.

[0:15:14]

PB: What was it like, you know, every fall when the auction was coming up in your household knowing that your house was on the auction block?

SB: I got really sick. I got really, really sick. All my hair fell out. I was throwing up. I was throwing up blood. I was going through, like, some really bad physical changes, and it was because I was going through all of that worried, but I was trying to keep it from my kids. So, I was trying to keep the house a normal home for them while trying to figure out what the hell I was going to do, you know, and so it...it was...it's undescrivable. And even after I learned that it wasn't my fault, it still feels so much like a personal failure that I've let myself and my kids and everybody down, and that...it just sticks with you. It's a terrible thing to do to anyone.

[0:16:05]

PB: So, at what point between having...between buying your house and being evicted in 2017 do you realize that it's not your fault and start to fight back?

SB: Well, I realized it wasn't my fault in the end of 2016, beginning of 2017 when Professor Atuahene contacted me, and she contacted me because my name was on this list from the United Community Housing Coalition of people who tried to but did not receive help. So, that's when I started to fight. I went...I joined the Coalition and, I don't know, we just...it kinda blew up from there. I can't tell you how many things I've done or protested or spoke about, and one of the biggest things that I like to do and that I will continue to do is just informing and educating the community because I know that had I had that educational piece, I wouldn't have been in that position. But, so many people of low income have no idea about Michigan's constitution. They don't care. They have too many other things to worry about--or the Poverty Tax Exemption. That my biggest goal is educating my people.

[0:17:16]

PB: And how have you gone about doing that educational work? What does that look like on a day-to-day basis for you?

SB: Well, it's not on a day-to-day basis right now. I usually do it when I can act, so the property foreclosure--I mean, the property tax appeals--only happen in February, March. So, we start doing outreach around November because when I reach out to people and...and educate them about this stuff, they want instant gratification. They're like, "Well, what can you do to help me now? I'm about to lose my house." And I hate to be the person like, "I can't help you until November, December." So for that particular piece, if I'm going to help a community, I don't want to go too soon. I don't believe in canvassing and...and showing up cold at somebody's door saying, hey, I have all this to offer you, but not right now.

So, the educational pieces I do now when I go out and speak are strictly that. Listen, I'm here to tell you about what's going on in your neighborhood. I'm here to tell you what you can do about it. This is when it can happen. And, I reach out to faith-based leaders. I reach out to food banks. I reach out to where I know people living in poverty actually go because the consensus is, oh, you know, go to this community meeting--which I go and speak there too, but the truth is--I can tell you from living in that environment--they're not there. The people with a couple dollars in their pocket trying to help the community are there, and they're not who I'm trying to reach. See, people keep coming at this from this middle-class, upper-class thought process. A bunch of people sitting in a room saying, "This is how you help the poor, and this is how you help the ghetto," with nobody from the ghetto in that room. It doesn't work like that.

[0:18:55]

PB: So for you--[coughs] excuse me--you didn't...so you...you didn't just, you know, fight against your own personal foreclosure, right, but then got involved in a much bigger...

SB: Absolutely.

PB: ...and movement building. How does...so how do you bring that con...or how do you encourage folks to do similar kind of things, to move beyond that like crisis moment to then like getting involved in activism and organizing work?

SB: Okay. So the thing about that is, number one, you have to kind of have a passion for this work. Not only is this work, it's...[laughs] it's not very lucrative, especially at first, number one. Number two is you have to have a certain passion to be around other people and want to help other people, and not everybody has that, and that's okay. So if they do, the first thing you have to be able to fix with people to get them into the community and doing this type of stuff is their issues, which are financial, their housing, their water, they're worried about CP--Child Protective Services. So, you want me to go to the ghetto and be like, "Listen. This is happening to you, but I want you to get up and come protest with us or come to

this community meeting. Yes, I know you have to work tomorrow and you're barely putting food on the table, but come do this for free." It doesn't work like that. So, the way we get people into this is start fixing what they're dealing with now.

[0:20:22]

PB: And then what's the next step after that?

SB: They have to want to. They have to actually care about their neighbor and their neighbor's neighbor's neighbor, and then it kind of...to me, it should flow kind of naturally. If you get into these spaces with these community, these grassroots organizations, and they see that you're actually dedicated, they're...they're open arms, man. I've not come across many organizations that were not like, "Okay, I see that you want to do something. Come on in." There were a few, but most of them are open arms. If you really want to make a difference and you have the time to dedicate, they're like coming in.

[0:21:00]

PB: So when you first got involved with the Coalition, can you kinda walk us through your early experiences...

SB: Oh, yeah.

PB: ...with the Coalition, and then will you take us up through the...the time where you become the Director of the Dignity Housing Restoration?

SB: Sure. So I can't remember when my first Coalition meeting was, but Bernadette [Atuahene] was pretty narrow-focused with me and fast-tracking me through everything. So, the first thing I did after maybe going to one or two

Coalition meetings was do a documentary. It was only five minutes, but it was still cameras and lights and everything in my house. Very strange. But I did it because of the Coalition, because I wanted this to get out. And then, it was speaking at a press conference. And then, it was holding an event at Wayne State. And then, it was protesting in front of Treasurer [Eric] Sabree's office, and it all went really, really fast like that. No matter what I did, every time I turned around, there was a camera and a microphone in my face, and it felt unworthy. I felt really unworthy to have all of that in my face just because I went through the same hardship that everybody else in the ghetto is going through. It still feels that way, right now. But, it...it went really fast like that.

And then, I don't know, in some Coalition meeting at some point, we thought what can we do to help people not who are losing their homes--because there's a...we were working on a ton of other stuff for that--but for people who already did, like myself? What can we do to make...give them back what they actually lost, which is their dignity? Because, again, that's a very personal failure. And, we came up with the fact that we should give them back a house. We did this as a pilot for the city, to hand it to 'em and say this is how you can fix what you did, and it's simple. We get a house through another organization for free and get it fixed up through funding, raising money and give it to somebody who we've proved was over...unconstitutionally over-assessed and illegally lost their home, and we've done that twice, and we're doing a third one in August.

[0:23:08]

PB: Are there plans in place to scale that up?

SB: For me, there would. I would love to be able to do this twice a year, or at the very least once a year, but the Coalition is deciding what to do with it. They maybe want to fold it into a compensation ordinance altogether. The plan from the beginning was to hand it to [Mike] Duggan and say, "This is how you fix what you did." It's if we could do it with the little bit of money that we raised, they for damn sure can do it. But he has ignored us, he has...he's been him. So that...that dream is about shot, but I'm not sure what the future of Dignity is. As for me, I'd love to see it be absorbed by housing organization and be continued. It's a beautiful

program to be able to hand somebody the keys to a house, no you don't owe us anything, we're gonna enroll you on a poverty tax exemption so you're not worried about taxes for next year, you don't... Here. It's...it's yours, and this is because the city wronged you. Beautiful program.

[0:24:07]

PB: What was that feeling like for you when you got the keys to your home?

SB: I worked really hard for it, so it wasn't the same feeling for me. It was...it was the biggest sigh of relief that I was in the middle...we were in the middle of creating this program when the eviction for me happened. I didn't want to get the first Dignity House. That felt bad to me. And when I left the Osborn Community being that it was in the same...same state it was when I was there, it...I felt guilty. I still feel guilty. It's like there's nothing that has been done over there. It's still a wreck. Everything is still a mess. So it...I can't share that beautiful feeling and be like, oh, I got this house and this and that. I still know I wasn't supposed to lose the last one. I left my neighborhood completely destroyed still, and it just felt guilty. It still does. But giving the house away to the...the person we gave the next one to, which was a las--on Juneteenth, felt amazing. That felt amazing.

[0:25:04]

PB: Could you talk about that day when...

SB: Absolutely. So on Juneteenth, we were able to do this large press conference in front of a resident's home, who we had given her this house. We got her on the poverty tax exemption. We got her enrolled in homeowner's classes. We...and we got the house fixed up and liveable, and we gave her the keys. I was able to...I was the one who found her, so I was able to call her and say, "Guess what? You know what, your house is ready." And it was...it was just an amazing feeling. That was an amazing feeling, being out on her lawn with the press that never pays us any attention was an amazing feeling, to be able to tell some of the story.

[0:25:46]

PB: Does it--speaking of the press--does it get exhausting ever? Do you get tired of, like, you know, like with this kind of thing, like...

SB: I don't...

PB: ...telling your story?

SB: Right. No, it doesn't get exhausting because it's still important. If the work was done and everybody was fine, there was no more over-assessments and people were being treated justly, then I would be exhausted with telling the story 'cause what am I doing it for, just to hear myself talk. But no, the work still needs to be done, people are still being treated like garbage, so not exhausting at all.

[0:26:19]

PB: Wi...on the note that you mentioned about like turning the Dignity Housing Restoration Program over to the city as like a...a guideline for here's how you do this reparation...

SB: Right.

PB: ...work, what would it take in your analysis--like in terms of like an organizing perspective or...or pressure on the city--what would it take to get that to come to fruition?

SB: [laughs] It would take some understanding from them, and, most of all, it would take them admitting that they did wrong. So I think that's the biggest hurdle is that it's hard for them to say, okay. 100,000 people lost their home, and a great deal of those people didn't have to. We did this wrong. We over-assessed them. Everybody makes mistakes. Let us make it right. They're not willing to do that. Duggan is still saying things like the numbers are flawed and all this garbage. So, we can't...we're...we're at a wall. We can't move forward if they're not even admitting that they did wrong. So, I don't know. I'd love to be able to sit him down and bring the human out in him and be like, listen. This is easily fixable. You know, this is all you have to do. But he's made that damn near impossible, himself and Eric Sabree.

[0:27:32]

PB: My perspective is that if somebody's not acting in one way it's 'cause they have a motive to act in another way.

SB: Absolutely.

PB: So, what's the motive that maintains and like keeps the foreclosures coming and like...

SB: Gentrification. That's the motive. I mean, we may want a--you know, regular people that grew up here and love the city--we may want a better Detroit, a more just Detroit, even a cleaner Detroit, a more shiny Detroit. We don't want a...a richer Detroit. Duggan and his people want a richer Detroit. They want tall apartment buildings that cost 3,000 dollars a month to live in so they keep us out, and they want these gentrified coffee shops and dog, you know, come feed your dog a bone, whatever it is, in downtown Detroit. We don't...we can't afford it. We don't care about it. Not only that, when I go downtown now--and I work downtown, but like if I go to do lunch or something--I feel so out of place, it's ridiculous. It's so bad. So, I think that they want to perpetuate that. They want to keep that going because if they can keep us out of downtown Detroit and whatever areas they find interesting next, then they can keep it the way they want

it, which is nice and...and neat, just like they did when they fled to the suburbs and left us in Detroit. They want their area--but now they want the city back, so they're doing the same thing. It's gentrification. That's his motive. But even still with that motive, he'd have to admit they did something wrong. So he's not gonna admit it, and why would he stop all these dollars? It doesn't make sense to him. There's no sense of community in...in him, in them, at all. I don't...I don't get it.

[0:29:19]

PB: So as somebody who was...who had gone through that process of being foreclosed on for a few thousand dollars, ...

SB: Mmm.

PB: ...what... I mean, what's the thought process that's going through your mind while you're experiencing this over a relatively small amount of money compared to the millions in dollars in tax incentives that are going into developers downtown and elsewhere?

SM: Mmm... Well, I mean, the millions in dollars in tax in...in...that's so that they'll spend and stay. They don't want me to spend. I don't have any money, and at that time I was unemployed and--I think when it began, I was employed, and then I got so sick I was unemployed--and what seems like a few thousand dollars is...might as well be a few million in the ghetto, so I don't...it doesn't...I'm not thinking about the tax breaks he's given to developers because I know why it's happened, and logically, it makes sense. If you take all emotion and community and your heart away from it, it makes sense logically to increase revenue, but you got to put all that back in. This is a city. This is a community. These are people. These are children. So, we don't think about what he's doing down there. We see it. We know it's happening, but the common thought is that the ghetto is broke and stupid.

So, that 5,000 dollars might as well have been five million. I wasn't gonna get a break. I knew that. I at least thought there would be some help along the way, though. I at least thought I'd be able to go to the city and say, okay. I am broke. What kind of plan or help you can...can you hand to me? 'Cause I do know they're giving out all these incentives. And there was none, and there's still really not any for the lowest-income-valued homeowners, so. I...I don't...it's...it's so... It's such a difficult subject still.

[0:31:08]

PB: Can you talk more about that, like what that process was like for you as you're trying to like find any kind of like reprieve through the city or through UCHC [United Community Housing Coalition] or any other organizations? Like what...what was that like for you in terms of trying to get help or any kind of assistance with this?

SB: It was hell because I was going with my best friend, who was also going through some tax issues, and she was able to get help. She was able to get into Step Forward and--which is a plan...don't ask me about it 'cause I...I forget all the details about it. But all these payment...there were...there were these payment plans, and she was able to get into 'em. And no matter where I went, every door was slammed. It just was. So, it was disheartening. Especially, you know, woke up, caught the bus downtown, caught the bus here, did this and that, did the footwork, did the paperwork, did whatever I had to do to still be told, you're still gonna lose your house. So, yeah. It was bad. It's a bad feeling.

[0:32:11]

PB: We...we kind of touched on this already, but repetition I think is worth for these kind of topics...

SB: Absolutely.

PB: So like, in your analysis, why is the city dedicating more resources to evicting people and demolishing houses than keeping people in their homes?

SB: You know, that's a tough question, though, because in like...in the...in the neighborhoods they're not fully interested in yet--let's say, let's take the last neighborhood I was in. They're barely demolishing houses over there, but the craziest thing is that these houses go...get taken from these people for tax foreclosure, and they sit and rot, and they become this abandoned terribleness. And maybe--maybe--the incentive for that is that they do have that blight money, so they need houses to tear down, but they're not using the actual amount of money that they were given. I know that from being next door to blight, being down the street from blight, being around the corner from it. Like where it's really heavy, it's not...that money's not being spent, but they need something to tear down to keep those funds coming in.

So, maybe that's the incentive. Maybe they just don't care. Maybe they just like making poor people suffer. I don't know what their real motive is. It looks like gentrification, but it's hard to say that in those areas 'cause nobody wants that yet. Not saying they won't. This is prime real estate. All of Detroit is. But, it looks more to me like they're more interested in the outer banks of Detroit, in downtown, in Midtown, Wayne State and that...and the Jefferson-Chalm--Chalmers area because that's beautiful over there, which is still predominantly Black community, so they're interested there now. So, their interest may go further. They're interested in some, a few other places, but like the really, really hard-hit ghettos? Yeah, I don't see a gentrification presence 'cause they're scared to death to come into those neighborhoods.

[0:34:05]

PB: So, if we pe--like, if we peel back a layer of this onion, like what do you see as like some of the fundamental causes of the blight that you've seen in these neighborhoods?

SB: Well, I've told you a big one. They evicted people due to tax foreclosure, and they let the house rot. It sits there. It may be up on the auction block. It may not be. The house that I lost wasn't...after like maybe a couple months of being in my new house, I just went online to look at it. It wasn't for sale. It wasn't for auction, and nobody owned--the city owns it. Months after being evicted by these guys who are supposed to have owned it, and it's just sitting there. It's going to rot, like most of the houses on that block. So, a big thing for blight is that they're sitting there.

And then, me, if I was a drug dealer--and I'm not giving them any credit, but if I needed somewhere to set up shop to make money, what's better? Even if I don't live in there, I can hide my drugs in there because all these dope fiends are coming from the suburbs anyway, so might as well. This is where blight comes from in there. Who cares about a house that's doing those sort of things, so I'm gonna throw my pop can or my chip bag over there 'cause eww anyway. This is where blight comes from. It's not that--you can only believe one of two things. You can believe that Black people are just destructive, disgusting, filthy force that tear up everything they do, or you can believe this is being structurally done. But if you're gonna believe the first part, you gotta believe that about ourselves, those of us in the organization...organizations, grassroots, and doing all this stuff. If...if Black people are just disgusting, nasty, destructive people, then that means you too. And that means you all of...of other nationalities working with us somewhat believe that if you believe that this type of stuff is coming from anywhere else.

[0:36:03]

PB: Can you talk about the ways that folks in your communities have tried to like keep up and like handle the...like maintain neighborhoods in face of this onsetting blight?

SB: It doesn't work like that. So, land has always been a big thing with Black people. They've been stealing our land forever. They've been stealing us from lands and...and things of that nature. When you create homeowners, right, when you're a homeowner you're just more inclined to take care of your property. You know what I'm saying? When you're a renter, it could be anything. The landlord

pissed you off, or, you know, you're already pouring so much money into somebody else's pocket, you may not fix this or that. It...it's j...it's a different feeling. So when you're a homeowner, you're more inclined to take care of your...your yard and your home and maybe even your neighbor's yard or home.

So, it starts with home ownership, so we have to promote that in the lowest-income neighborhoods. We have to promote it somehow. Yes, there may be people only living off of food stamps and Medicaid. How can they become homeowners? Answer that question. Answer the question of the people who are only making 2,000 dollars a month. Only making 7[00], getting 700 from social security. If they're not homeowners, how do we create them as homeowners? And then, stop bussing in schoolfuls of white folks--because that's what I've seen the most when I was over there--to come clean up and plant flower pots. This is not what we need your help with. So, the way that we can work together to get rid of the blight is creating homeowners in these neighborhoods.

[0:37:32]

PB: Do you mind if we talk a little bit about kind of the...the inner workings of the Coalition...

SB: Sure.

PB: ...and what that looks like? First, could you just like kind of walk us through the partner organizations that are...

SB: Oh, man.

PB: ...--and I know there's a lot--but...

SB: There are a lot. There are.

PB: ...like what kind of roles each group plays?

SB: Sure, sure. So, the Coalition to End Unconstitutional Tax Foreclosure was created by Professor Bernadette Atuahene. Some of our partner organizations are DJC [Detroit Justice Center], MACC [Mack Avenue Community Church] Developments, We The People, Detroit People's Platform. I'm sorry. I'm...I'm...there's so many. CDAD [Community Development Advocates of Detroit], Good Jobs Now, Street Democracy, Progress Michigan. There's like 15 that I'm not finna (??) be able to name.

But...so, we all come together collectively and look at each other's strengths. So, you're an organizer, and your organization gives food to people. Let's say that that's what they do. So in the Coalition, we're gonna delegate things to you that are in your area of expertise. And being that we have so many community organizations, somebody usually does something from everywhere, and we do those things. So, we pull together for whatever we're working on, and the collective people do what they do best. And right...right now, and from the beginning, it's about stopping over-assessment, compensating the people that have lost their homes, and we're working on that in every aspect that we possibly can, creating compensation organ--ordinances, trying to get some things in the legislation, or creating a loan fund. We're constantly brainstorming on how we can stop people from losing their homes and what we can do to further help them sustain them once we get them in the home.

[0:39:26]

PB: Did you have any involvement with the lawsuit that was filed?

SB: Absolutely not. The Morningside lawsuit? ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union]?

PB: Yeah.

SB: No. We influenced it. The Coalition absolutely influenced it. Bernadette's study absolutely influenced it, but the actual action into that, no.

PB: Is there a particular reason why?

SB: No. I'm not a lawyer, but other than that, no. It was...sometimes things that are being worked on that openly, yet kind of be...need to be kept close to the chest. So even though we have Coalition members that were very involved in the...in the lawsuit, they couldn't come to the Coalition meetings and say, "Hey, this is what's going on." You know, so that's why the rest of us were not involved.

[0:40:12]

PB: You mentioned before about kind of like your role is doing the education work and...

SB: Right.

PB: ...having like the Dignity Housing Restoration Program. Could you talk about like...a little bit more about the roles that you play within the Coalition?

SB: Right. So at first, it was just telling my story. At first, it was just speaking to people normally. Okay, so when I go into a community meeting or somewhere where the lowest-median-income people are gathering versus you going in, you may go in and use all of these very intelligent terms and...and...and, you know, you're trying to get the information to them, but it's hard to listen to you. You understand what I'm saying? Whereas I'm gonna go in and absolutely be cutthroat with them, like you're losing your house, pay attention to your neighborhood, and I was getting a lot of response, so that's been my role is...is being in the

community or being on the radio or, you know, doing this type of thing. And then, the position came up at the Detroit Justice Center, which put me in a better position to get into spots with other people that needed to hear what was going on, officials, mainly.

[0:41:28]

PB: So how did you first get involved with DJC [Detroit Justice Center]?

SB: So, Amanda Alexander is a part of the Coalition. And so, when she started hiring for when she got the Detroit Justice Center up running, and she started hiring for the mass amounts of things that she was gonna have going on, once the community legal worker roles came up, I applied because it fit what I was doing already. I was just gonna get paid for what I was doing. That's about the stretch of it.

PB: What kind of...can you talk a little bit about what your daily life is and your roles in that position as a community legal worker?

SB: Absolutely. So, what we were set to do was to appeal over-assessment. So every year, a Detroit homeowner gets their property tax assessment essentially letting you know how much the city says your home is worth, and they...they're...and that's what they're gonna tax you on. Your taxable value, all of this is on this paper. So, we'd take a look at that compared to about five or six comparable sales in your area. So, we look at the five or six houses or we may look at ten that were sold recently in your area. So if they're saying your house is worth 30,000 dollars, but the last ten houses that sold sold for 5,000 dollars, whether they were sold to an investor or whoever, they cannot tax you on 30,000 dollars. They have to tax you on that same 5,000 dollars. So then, we write an appeal to the city--the City Assessor's Office in February. If we get nowhere with that, then we go in front of the Board of Review in March, and last year we were a hundred percent successful.

Right now, we're trying to find ways to stop people from getting their water shut off, and we're trying to help the people who have these high bills keep their water on. So, we're just like out here trying to find people that will help us help people.

[0:43:21]

PB: What connection...how do you connect the dots between the water shutoffs and the tax foreclosures?

SB: It's all connected at one. They can put--the water company can put a lien on your house and send you into foreclosure because your water bill... Let's say your water bill is 3,000 dollars, which is very, very, very...it's...it's common, sad enough, and you can't pay it. They can put that on your house, and then you're losing your house due to... It goes on your taxes, and then you're losing your house due to tax foreclosure. So they're...that's how it's directly correlated, but more than anything, it's happening to the lowest-income-valued people. That's how it's connected. This stuff is not happening--it may be happening to some middle-class people, but they can afford to be on payment plans or pay their bill off, so this is happening to 94 percent of the lowest-income-valued people. So, this is how it's connected. It's all...these are the same people I'm talking to. The only difference in the people I may talk to about water and tax foreclosure is that some of them don't...are not owners. Some of them are--the water people are--renters. [coughs]

[0:44:30]

PB: How did--this is backing up a little bit--but how did the period of emergency management and bankruptcy impact the tax foreclosures and the water shutoffs?

SB: I don't know how it impacted it, really. I really don't know a whole lot about what was going on with that when it happened 'cause I was in crisis myself. So that...that time, as much as I knew what was going on, I don't know how it directly impacted this. I know that a lot of things were getting swept under the rug, and

they were doing a lot of dirty deals with the tax foreclosures while that was going on, and people weren't paying any attention 'cause they were focused on that.

[0:45:11]

PB: Coming back to the...to the Coalition, what kind of lessons have you learned about coalition-building?

SB: Mmm.

PB: That a...that's tough, and it's hard to sustain, and the Coalition's been doing this...

SB: Right.

PB: ...for some time.

SB: Right.

PB: What do you attribute that to and what kind of lessons do you draw from it?

SB: I would attribute it to the fact that everybody actually cares about the people they're trying to help. Otherwise, it would have fallen apart long ago. I've learned that people are not always happy with a woman being in charge. I've learned that, you know, progress is possible, and brainstorming is necessary, and...and sometimes you need people coming in from all kinds of different perspectives, but community is prevalent. It...it...and it's the most important. So, that's the biggest thing I've taken out of this. I've learned that there are grassroots organizations in Detroit. Who knew? Because I promise you people in the lowest-income-valued homes do not really know about the grassroots organizations that are going out

and doing all this fighting for them. So, I learned a bunch. I take away many, many lessons. I take away that if you are diligent and persistent and you fight hard that you're definitely going to come out with some sort of result. It may not be the best one at first, but if you keep on, then maybe you'll get there.

[0:46:30]

PB: You mentioned that you learned that some people aren't happy with having Black women leadership in organizations.

SB: Absolutely.

PB: I'm not going to ask you to name names or things like that, but...

SB: Of course not.

PB: ...could you say more about that?

SB: Absolutely. Absolutely, I've seen that people just didn't want...there were people that did not want to take her direction. And, it would be different if she was saying something outlandish or proposing something outlandish. It was simply that she's a very...you know, she's a...she's a bullduz--bulldozer. She's a force to be reckoned with, and everybody did not take to that kindly. They just didn't, and they didn't last long, so.

[0:47:13]

PB: Mm. Another thing you mentioned that struck me was, you know, that lack of recognition at like...in the most...in the poorest communities...

SB: Yeah.

PB: ...with grassroots organizations...

SB: Right.

PB: What is it that grassroots organizations need to be doing differently or doing a better job of to have that kind of connection and relationship?

SB: Dealing with the actual community and not sitting in their offices or at their tables talking about what the community needs. They need to have community members at the table, and then they need to be in the ghetto, the hardest-hit ghettos, like in there talking at the food banks or whatever they go, at the grocery stores, the places you actually catch these people. DHS [Department of Human Services] offices, WIC [Women, Infants, and Children] offices, those places, not the community meetings and the farmers' market that everybody can't afford to go to or they don't even know exist. So, actually get into the community and take some community members on board and pay them.

[0:48:11]

PB: When you look...like, having had so much contact with organizations all around the city, when you look around at this organizing landscape, who do you see that's doing a good job with that?

SB: Oh, DJC [Detroit Justice Center]. [laughs] But they're...they're...everybody is doing a pretty good job. I can't really point anybody out and say they're doing a crap job. I don't get to work with a lot of the organizations directly. If you're dealing with housing or water, then I may be able to work with you, and I have not yet come across an organization that is dealing with those things that is doing it poorly. So, definitely like We the People is doing an amazing job. CDAD

[Community Development Advocates of Detroit] is doing an amazing job. Progress Michigan--all of...almost everybody I named that's in the Coalition that's working on housing is doing an amazing job. The only thing that is lacking is, like I told you, have to get into the community and with the community members, even the scary ones.

[0:49:07]

PB: When you're looking back at these years of organizing that you've been involved with, can you think of folks that, you know, are--that were in crisis mode, like yourself, that have also gotten...like, gotten more deeply involved in organizing work?

SB: Hm. So, there's another gentleman who lost his home. He's a Caucasian gentleman from Southwest Detroit. His family owned his home since 1906, and he lost it in 2017--2016 or 2017--to illegal tax foreclosure, and everytime we come--he's not there yet--but every time we have something where there's speaking going on, he can't wait to speak. You know, it's...it's raging inside of him. I see a potential progress there. And there are...my team of community legal workers are two other people who are community members. One of them spent 18 years in prison. These are people who are doing the work, and they come out of the community. So yeah, I've seen some people. I haven't seen enough to satisfy myself. Like, I would love to see great deal of community me...members getting paid to do the work who actually care about it first, and maybe they can do a...a stint without pay, but you got to realize people can't afford to do that. So I would love to see more, but I have seen some.

[0:50:33]

PB: If you were giving advice to, like, younger organizers or current organizers that are trying to do that kind of work effectively, what advice would you give in terms of like providing people with support or whatever people need to make that kind of...

SB: Well, what do you mean by that? What do you mean?

PB: In terms of like...so that process that you were just describing about like how folks move out of crisis mode and into like that organizing...

SB: Right.

PB: ...capacity. What...how do you support folks as they're getting more actively involved in organizing work?

SB: You gotta fix what's wrong for them. So if you come across somebody in the community who has this powerful voice and, you know, gets people's attention, gets people to listen, and you can see that they got that leadership inside of them, what's going on with them at home? Is...are the lights due? Do they need a sitter? Do they need food? Fix those things as you're propelling them in front of cameras and, you know, decision making and what do we think you...you know, what do you think... Fix that first. If you do that, then you can absolutely help somebody progress into this beautiful organizer, but without that, it...it's too difficult. It's just too difficult.

[0:51:56]

PB: When I'm thinking about like DJC and like ACLU and like the legal approach to this work, ...

SB: Mmhm.

PB: ...it seems like it...like oftentimes it's on such a different level than on the grassroots side of it.

SB: Right.

PB: So how do you see those kind of two often different approaches...

SB: Mmm.

PB: ...working hand in hand towards the same kind of goals?

SB: Well, as far as the legal approach is considered, that's going to be more fact-driven and more result-driven. It just is. Those are the two things. This is the law. So with us, we took something that had a system in place. So, the tax...the tax appeals, the Board of Review, and appeal writing has always been available, but say that to somebody who has no clue about any of this. You can write an appeal. Like, this sounds like the hardest thing on the planet. So when they created... So, the Detroit Justice Center created the community legal workers to help people navigate through legal processes that you don't necessarily need a lawyer for. Outside of that, you know, they worked with returning citizens and a lot around the jails. They created this part of it. They didn't have to. They could have just did what they're doing. That's absolutely good enough, but they created this part of it because they know that there are all these hurdles for people that they think they have to hire an attorney for that they don't, that they just need navigation with, or they may need a third-person advocate, but they don't need an attorney.

So--and this particular law approach is fact- and result-driven, whereas to...you know, some gra...grassroots organizations may be trying to work to get something in in legislation, maybe having sit-down after sit-down with officials in Detroit and not necessarily getting instant gratification, let's say. So, that's how it's different. We, as well, sit down with officials, and it's meeting after meeting before we get something done. But once we find a legal leg to stand on, then we're good, and we can go, and we'll do that. And if we win, we win. If we don't, we don't. We come back and try again. Those are the differences.

[0:54:08]

PB: I want to come back to something you mentioned earlier. This is like a different note, but...

SB: Okay.

PB: ...you had mentioned before that you had, before you got involved in the housing spheres, been like a parent advocate, an educational advocate.

SB: Right.

PB: Could you talk more about that?

SB: Sure. My son had ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder], but he was super intelligent. He is super intelligent. So every other week, he was kicked out of school, suspended for finishing his work and crawling on the ground, something crazy, but every other week. So, I would have to go through all these channels to get him back in. I did all this research, and I studied and I studied the medications and so on and so forth. By the time he got to high school, he no longer had the [air quotes] "diagnosis." So, I just was always put in a position where other people with younger children or even sometimes high school kids were going through these constant suspensions, and by this time, I knew better. I knew what DA--DPS [Detroit Public Schools] could do and what they couldn't do, what was being done simply because teachers didn't want to deal with somebody and what wasn't, and so I would go into meetings with them and keep their kids in school or get their kids back in school or create a...a relationship between the school and the parent, and I did that a lot.

[0:55:23]

PB: And what did you learn coming out of that in terms of like going through those processes and organizing on like a smaller basis? But what did you take away from that about like the Detroit Public Schools or about like how to organize and advocate?

SB: I would love to see something happening around that because I don't think people are as aware that this is happening like it's happening. Let me say that first. Secondly, I learned that little Black boys--all of them according to most public schools--have ADHD, and it's sad. I learned that if you educate yourself--mine was trial and error because my kid was going through it, but I did educate myself--then you can fight against most things, usually with a legal leg to stand on. So once I found that with DPS, I did it for myself, and I did it for others. Mostly because not I was learning lessons but because I was pissed that they...you know, I kept running into these people and it was never, almost never, a little girl. Almost never. It was always a little Black boy, and it...it would piss me off so bad that I would go in there with the utmost respect for the principal or whomever I was sitting with but have to tell them their code of conduct and their law that they knew already. It's just that they thought this parent was stupid and broke and wasn't gonna come to the school anyway, and they would get away with continuously suspending this child.

So, what I learned is you have to show up, and if you're not able to show up, give somebody the permission who will show up with DPS because otherwise they're...they...they just automatically think the worst of you. And, I know some awesome teachers. I have four Osborn [High School] graduates, one Cody [High School] graduate, so I know some teachers that really gave a damn, but I knew their frustrations, too. So, I knew that, you know, some of the white teachers were getting their cars egged and...and getting called gay, and some of them were, and they were getting treated really badly, so I know how that can be.

To give an anecdote, my son... A blind fell down in the teacher's room, and the teacher called me, and she was so pissed off, and she was like, "You need to come get your son 'cause he just put this blind up, and I didn't ask him to." And I stopped her, and I said, "I want you to realize why you're calling me. You're calling me because my son put up a blind." I said, "Your better conversation to me would be, 'I can't deal with Kayshon. I want Kayshon in a different class because I just

personally can't deal with him." That I can respect, and that I can understand. So when I went into these meet--meetings, I reminded people that sometimes candor is the only kindness, and you have to be honest. This kid is too much for me. Is there somewhere else we can put him? You know, does this child have an IEP [Individualized Education Program]? Has he signed a 4--a 50--401 or 501 form which prevents them from suspending him? Usually these things are not in place, and they get away with suspending the child, which what? Leads to what? Dropouts, right? 'Cause who wants to keep going back to a school trying to catch up the work that they missed? They fall behind, they don't want to be there anymore.

So I did a lot of preventing that, and I helped a couple of little Black boys graduate because of that. One of them was playing with a girl in a wheelchair, and this particular girl in a wheelchair was very...she had a reputation about herself, and they were joking and playing, and he did something really stupid and put a plastic bag over her head, not like tried to suffocate her, just sat it on her, but a teacher caught her--caught him, and it was two months before graduation, and he was kicked out, like for good, not gonna graduate. How could I have let that stand? So I got him back in school, and he graduated. But if nobody is there to do that, they are running over these kids.

Or they're pushing 'em out! I've had kids, my kids, that I set back a grade 'cause they don't get this math. Like fourth and fifth grade and sixth grade and they're...they're struggling with the math, and you want to propel them to eighth grade. No, like, they're gonna do sixth grade again, and they hate that. They absolutely hate that. I'm sorry that I'm gonna make you make my kid get the fucking math, but--sorry--but it's very...that... DPS is one of the most frustrating entities in Detroit.

[0:59:32]

PB: What...I mean, what connections do you see between those kind of problems that are taking place in DPS and these other problems that we're facing with tax foreclosures and water shutoffs?

SB: Well, that's so deeply rooted that that...it's like a trick question because it's definitely the prison...the public school to prison pipeline, and it's a poor thing. The teachers are getting garbage pay and because of that there's no sufficient air in the schools, sufficient water in the school, their conditions are dirty, and they don't have everything they need, so the teachers come to school frustrated. The schools...the kids come to school frustrated. Yet and still, there's this stigma in the Black community or in the ghettos period of having to look the best because we're all broke, so let me look like the best broke person here. So there's that stigma, so kids are already pressured when they go into school to be that person. And then it's hot, and then it's dirty, and then the teachers are already in a shi--a crap mood because they don't want to be there and you don't want to be there, and so it creates... What environment does that sound? It sounds more like freaking prison, right? So--and that's what it's like, and then some of them even look like it with bars on the windows and the doors are padlocked and this and that. What do you expect to come out of that environment? Harvard material? It's not happening.

It's done structurally because education is not important in the United States anyway, especially not educating my people. And of course, it's not...it's not important. This city is 84, 85 percent Black. It's gonna be the least important thing here. Because if they educate us, then things like tax foreclosure and water affordability are not on the table because we're too smart to fall for those type of tricks and predatory loans and all of those things. You can't keep us educated--that doesn't sound right. That doesn't sound like America to me. So, yeah. That's...DPS, the Detroit Public School is so--public schools period, but here, it's so deeply rooted. And the sad part is you got a lot of teachers that really do care, and they're just stuck in this mess getting crap pay and getting treated like crap.

[1:01:50]

PB: And it sounds like you're somebody that like your neighbors or your community goes to as like a point person for dealing with this stuff, like you mentioned that, you know, you take kids in when they need... [clears throat] when they need a place, but you advocate for these kids that need help in dealing with the school system. This is kind of like a...it's a personal question, but like

what...what is it about you as a person, if you think like reflecting on yourself, that makes you that person...

SB: [laughs]

PB: ...in your community?

SB: That is another loaded question 'cause I don't know because I'm...I'm not always pleasant, you know. I'm very strict and...and blunt and--not mean. Like I've... People will say it jokingly, but I'm not. I'm very strict and very blunt, and so I...I used to question... Right now, I have my 24-year-old college graduate in my house, another, a girl I raised from ninth grade who was being severely neglected, and I kept her and promised her she'd get to college. She went to college. She's in my house again, and I don't understand why they keep coming back because I make it very difficult. These are grown folks. They got a dish day. They, you know, they...they have all these rules. I wouldn't want to be there, and I tell the people that even like the other kids, the one that put the bag over the girl's hair--head, he was at my house for like a week a couple weeks back, and I asked, "Why would you want to be here?" Like, soon as I get up, you have to get up, you have to clean, no lounging. You know, it's constant. Why do you want to be here? So, I have no idea why they keep coming to me. I have no clue.

And, I was the point person on the East Side. Nobody really knows me on the West, and the good...the difference is, and let me tell you. In the poor communities, we will look and help each other, look...look to each other for help. They were more susceptible to it. On the West Side, it's still a poor community, but it's...it's a little better, it's a little cleaner, more homeowners on that block, and everybody stays to themselves. Everybody. I talk to a few neighbors, and I've helped a couple of neighbors so far--I've been there a year--but not really. Everybody stays to theirself inside their little gate and in their house and Fourth of July, maybe that time of year, you might see some activity, you know, people come out. And every now and then, somebody gets drunk and I see some activity, but if somebody was starving on that block, I wouldn't know it. Whereas to the last block, somebody would have been like, you know, go holler at her. At least she'll be able to send you to a food bank.

[1:04:20]

PB: Why do you think it's different in your current neighborhood? Why do you think...

SB: There are more white folks, and--just being honest. There are more white folks on the block, and they're not gonna reach out to me for help because they don't know what bag I'm coming out of, and it's even more of a stigma to be white and need food, I suppose. I mean, if you asked my mother, who is Caucasian, she would say just that, like they're not gonna come over here and ask you for food. Whereas, though, when I was in Southwest, though, and little white folks didn't have a problem standing in free lunch lines. I don't know what changed. So that's why there's not that community feel. There's like white, white, white, Black, Arabic--they're damn sure not coming to me for help. A few Mexicans. Too mixed, but not enough community, like nowhere near enough community for people to be like, hey, I need, you know, this, this, or that. It's crazy.

PB: Are these white folks in the neighborhood from Detroit, or they came into Detroit?

SB: I couldn't tell you. They're not very friendly.

PB: Mm.

SB: I'm fine with that, though. Stay on your side, I'll stay on my side. At least that way if like our views on immigration are probably very different, so let's not have an argument about it 'cause the things I'm gonna say are gonna be, you know, you're not gonna want to speak to me for the duration of the time that I'm here. And then when I first got there, they kept calling on my dogs. I had a...I have a German Shepherd-Pitt mix who had puppies that had Rottweiler in 'em, and it was her and two puppies. I ended up having to get rid of the two puppies. They kept

calling 'cause they bark. But truthfully--and there's like some after ten o'clock ordinance. I don't know, but on the East Side nobody cared if the dogs barked all night. We just...they bark. They're mean dogs. They were mean. So, I got rid of the two. I knew then what type of a community it was.

[1:06:12]

PB: Yeah. And this isn't so much of a leap, but like what's the role that like policing plays within this kind of context...

SB: Mm.

PB: ...in terms of like destroying neighborhoods and displacing neighborhoods?

SB: Well, okay. So number one, the police force is now hiring people that don't live in Detroit, right. So you, number one, even...even when they were hiring people who lived in Detroit, they weren't hiring people that lived in the neighborhoods that they were policing the most. So, you have these people going into these neighborhoods that are looking down on a neighborhood befo--as they enter, like eww, and treating the people as such. So, you can't do that. You just absolutely cannot do that. That creates racial tension. That creates, even with the Black cops, it's still racial to me. If a Black cop pulls us over, he is no different. He is blue. He is not white, he is not Black, he is blue, and he is, sad enough, the enemy at this junction because I have Black men in my family, and I'm always on the defensive about what's gonna happen. Man, Black men in my community. Anytime something happens on my block with a Black man, I have to pay all this attention and I have to stop what I'm doing and watch this interaction and hope to God nothing goes wrong.

The police play a horrible part in the neighborhoods right now, and the grand thought would be, okay. They need to come into the neighborhoods and make friends. We don't want to be their friend right now either, though. There's a lot of illegal activity in the ghetto, like it or not. But you know, if we created sufficient

jobs and education, there wouldn't be. So as much as it's a...a bad thing to sell drugs, these are how these people are living. So we don't want...they don't want to be their friend for sure. And then if you're the two homeowners on the block with all this activity, you don't want to be their friend 'cause then you look like you're talking to them about everything else that's going on on the block. So, I have a save or a fix for the police right now: leave Black folks the hell alone. That's about the stretch of it.

[1:08:18]

PB: I want to come back to...since you were touching on kind of the gender dynamics in that issue, I want to ask about just like your daily life as caring so much...

SB: Mmhm.

PB: ...as a Black woman, organizer, mother, full-time employee...

SB: [laughs]

PB: ...at DJC. Like, can you talk a little bit about kind of like the weight that you carry in daily life?

SB: I don't feel the weight that I carry on a dail--so, again, when you're talking to someone like me who has come out of this poverty situation that I'm not out of, I'm just a...a...a...a step closer to maybe not drowning, it's like we carry so much from the beginning that we don't feel it. We don't feel it until things get a little better. When things get a little better, sad enough, what you'll see a lot in the Black community is when things get a little better, we might even get a little higher on drugs or...or...you know what I'm saying? We might break down a little harder because we don't know what to do without carrying all of that stuff.

So for me, I think, carrying the stuff for other people is keeping me going. You know what I mean? I...I have to have people to care for. It's just who I am, so I don't feel it. Every now and then when I am not doing anything at all and I sit down for a second, things get a little heavy, but I got to do the shit again the next day, so there's no time to sit and be like, oh, there's so much going on in my life. I don't have time for that.

[1:09:52]

PB: What kind of practices do you...or, you know, like, on a daily life or a weekly life, like, how do you take care of yourself?

SB: Mm.

PB: Like everything that you're involved with and all that you have going on.

SB: I ride my bike. I eat out. I get my nails done. I get my hair done. That's it. I might take my kids out to eat or let them go spend some stupid amount of money at like Wal-Mart or something. That makes me feel good. Other than that... I cook big dinners. I have a drink. Me and Jack Daniels have a long talk. Other than that, that's it. And I got to do it quickly 'cause usually I got to go to work the next day or at least the day after that. So, that's it.

[1:10:34]

PB: Have you seen your organizing work influence the way that your children think about these issues?

SB: Not as much as I'd like. The way they think about 'em? Yes. I just, I don't know...I'm waiting on a kid to get up and be like let me do this! And they're like,

nahh. They're like listening to the rap and trying to learn new dances. They don't care about any of this, and that's good and bad. That means I'm not showing too much at home, but they still know about it. So, it's good and bad. But so, I have a nine--a...a ten-year-old and eleven-year-old who I have political conversations with every now and then that reminds me that they're still on the right track. Like, I have...my ten-year-old is very boisterous. If there was gonna be an activist, that would be the one. So, they'll get very much into race or Trump or what...what have you if I bring it up and I propose a question to them, so I know they know and I know they know what's right, but they don't pay any of this any attention, which is good. I like it that way. This is too heavy for kids. And I love to see little activists and little people that are very knowledgeable, but I think it's so heavy that I'm glad mine don't have it right now.

[1:11:49]

PB: This is a little bit of a...a shift, but I'm wondering if you could explain what...what, in your...in your analysis, what justice would look like for victims of the foreclosure crisis?

SB: It would look similar to what we're doing with Dignity Restoration. Because it's so rooted in racism and everything, to me it would look like giving back a house, give 'em some money to get things off the ground for the first year or two so that they're comfortable. And really, for the tax foreclosure thing? That's it. That's all. Just give people back--they could've...the people that lost their house due to home--due to foreclosure could have been going through some of the worst times in their life before the foreclosure started, but that was still their house, and I know personally didn't matter what was going on in the hou--my house was falling apart, but it was mine. So, give them back a house. Of their choosing would be perfect, but if not, just give 'em back a house. Give them some money to get off the ground. That's a start. And then, stop over-assessing poor people's property.

[1:12:56]

PB: If you were to--I'm thinking about like how we can be using these kind of interviews in like proactive ways.

SB: Yeah.

PB: I know like Internet access is a big issue, ...

SB: Mm.

PB: ...but I'm thinking about the different ways that we can present these kind of conversations, and I say all that so as to think about, like, if I asked you a question about what would you say to somebody that gets the eviction slip on their door in terms of like what steps to take, like how we could...like something where we could help push...

SB: Okay.

PB: ...that out a little bit. So...

SB: So, eviction or foreclosure? The yellow bag, the foreclosure bag?

PB: Yeah.

SB: The yellow bag? So, they would want to go to the United Community Housing Coalition. They would want to come to the Show Cause hearing, which happens in Februar--January, and there's all these resources in the room. They will want to reach out to somebody who's prevalent in the community. Maybe that's when they need to take in a community meeting, so they can find somebody who is related to housing to know where else they could go to maybe seek shelter. United Community Housing Coalition may be able to help them keep their home.

If...if they reach that step, then they'd want to reach out to us next to appeal their property lease, see if they're over-assessed, appeal their property tax assessment. UCHC would also be able to help them get onto the Poverty Tax Exemption, and there may be other housing entities that are doing similar things right now. UCHC is the big one, and that's where I would tell people to go. But hopefully, there's more people coming...more organizations coming out to help the people that are gonna get the yellow bags.

The reason they wouldn't come directly to us is because they're already in that point where they're gonna lose their house. So yes, I can appeal your over-assessment. It's not gonna help you not lose your house. You still have to pay your taxes, so I wouldn't want 'em to come to me until after they have their home back or their home is secure, they got on a payment plan, what have you. But definitely--the Treasurer's Office, they can get on a payment plan. They can do that. And so if you can afford it, absolutely go ahead and do that. But if you know you cannot afford it and you're going to lose your home, go to United Community Housing Coalition. If they can't help you, then at the very least, they'll be able to dir--put you, point you in a direction of somebody who can, but they should be able to help you.

[1:15:20]

PB: We've talked to several folks who have mentioned that like one of the impediments to getting help or to like getting active is like dealing with a sense of like shame or guilt.

SB: Absolutely.

PB: What would you tell folks to like encourage them to like reach out to UCHC and try to get over that?

SB: That's, again, different...a difficult thing. I would be the person that needed to tell 'em, let...let's say that first. Somebody from a...a higher position doesn't need

to tell them you need to get off your butt and go get help. Coming from you, that don't mean nothing. But I can tell you, either you're gonna lose your house because you're gonna sit there and be depressed, or you're gonna get up and make this one trip to UCHC, see what they got to say, see if it don't brighten how you feel, and move on from there. The first step...just take this first step and go here. You can do it. I'll drive you. You need those people, too. So, I don't know what's in their community or who they're close to. You need somebody who may be...may have to say, hey, I'll come get you. I'll drive you. I'll stand there with you. Because that depression and that personal failure is so real. It's immobilizing. So, I know that maybe you ne--they need somebody to go get them out of the house to go do this, and that's the shame and defeat that they're feeling. But, they need somebody to...being honest with them and be, hey, come on, let's go. And that, sad enough, can't be some middle-class person who's trying to organize and tell them that, absolutely not.

[1:16:46]

PB: What kind of relationships have you or the Coalition had with some of these other organizations that aren't involved with the Coalition, like say Moratorium NOW! or Detroit Eviction Defense?

SB: Detroit Eviction Defense we've had some good contact with. I...I still get their newsletter--newsletters and everything like that. Detroit Eviction Defense does some pretty good work with renters. The only reason we don't have a whole lot of coalition--correlation with them is 'cause it's renters. We can't do a lot for renters. But Moratorium NOW! was a part of the Coalition at first, and don't know what happened.

[1:17:29]

PB: Who else should we be speak--we already talked a little bit about this, but I want to just provide space in case there's like people...

SB: Right.

PB: ...or things that are coming to mind that we should also be speaking to to get these stories.

SB: Roslyn [Ogburn?]. Have you talked to--what...what was her last name? She is with...is it CDAD [Community Development Advocates of Detroit]? Have you talked to anybody from CDAD?

PB: No.

SB: Okay. So, I need...I need to like look through business cards in my purse, and I can definitely give you a few more people, but some people that are gonna give you some real honesty. You probably have already been talking to Monica [Lewis-Patrick], me. You need to talk to people, more community members who are in this fight. The organizers are great. What would we do without, you know, the education and money that they spent to start this, and I can never appreciate people like Professor A--Atuahene enough, but to fix, the people closest to the problem are gonna be the closest to the solution, period. That's it. So, those are the people you need to talk to. You need to talk to people in the community who have gone through this, are going through this, or, you know, won it somehow.

[1:18:38]

PB: And, the last question that I have is kind of like looking forward and provide space for visioning. What's the...the...what's your vision for the future of Detroit...

SB: Mm.

PB: ...that guides the work that you do?

SB: Hmm. My vision for the future of Detroit is no over...no more over-assessments, fixing...going into the communities and seeing what works best for that community to get it together, going into...bringing DPS some help, advocates, people who--paid people--who are gonna go in and...and help get things together, whether it be to clean up on a regular basis or to help students, to pull an ADHD kid out of a class for a second 'cause he needs to calm down, whatever, what have you. They--but you got to pay people to do that. Can't keep asking parents to volunteer valuable work hours to do that--or anybody else. Water, you know, that whole...that whole human right thing, give people clean water. At the very least, clean affordable water. I'd love for it to be free, but clean, affordable water. And just, a...a mingling...like, I'd love, I'd love a...a new shiny Detroit that's pretty, but a...a mingling of the actual neighborhoods and this development. I'd love to see some of those developers spreading their dollars where they're actually needed in Detroit. That would be great. Other than that, I don't know.

[1:20:07]

PB: Is there anything that we didn't touch upon that you want to go into, or...

SB: I don't think so. [laughs]

PB: I know we covered a lot of ground, and...

SB: Yeah.

PB: ...I apologize for kind of like jumping from place to place.

SB: You're fine.

PB: So, I appreciate...

SB: This is more of a structured interview. A lot of people don't write questions down, and it's very irritating.

PB: Oh. Okay.

SB: It is so bad.

PB: I'm always cautious about being like too far on the structured side 'cause I don't want people to feel like I'm peppering them with questions like...

SB: Right.

PB: ...question, answer, question, answer.

SB: But at the same time, like having that, what you have in front of you, is so important, and even better for me is some people send me their questions ahead of time. [whispers] Fucking perfect. But more than anything, it's just, "So tell us!" and it's...I don't want to do that. I don't want to do it. It's... This is better.

PB: That's kind of how I operate, too, like vague questions is...

SB: Yeah, don't...

PB: ...you're not getting anything. [laughs]

SB: You're gonna get a lot of ums, and I hate to sound like that. It sounds terrible.

[1:21:05]

PB: Do you have any questions?

SB: Sure.

Herbert Taylor [HT]: So, hearing your story today...you may have touched on this when we were talking about your family, how the foreclosure experience affected your family.

SB: Mmhm.

HT: So I'm married, and you've expressed that you're married as well.

SB: Mm.

HT: In what ways did your husband support you and your family as you...

SB: My marriage almost died, just being honest. You take things out on the person you're closest to. So, we took everything out on each other. So, it's still in like repair because of every...all of that. Because at some times in my mind if he was being a better man and a better husband, then we wouldn't be failing. And sometimes in his mind, it was probably vice versa, and we're just always at each other's throat. So while we were trying to keep kids happy and, you know, keep them at a point where they don't absolutely know our house is falling apart, we were tearing each other to shreds. So as a married man, remember that. Remember you take things out on the person you're closest to, so when things get really, really, really shitty, just try to kind of come back to that and remind your wife of like we're doing this because who else to do it to. If you're not doing that

to each other when things are really bad, then y'all are doing it to somebody else. So yeah, my marriage almost died. It was...it was bad. And we were both at the point, like not so broken up, we were just like, fuck it, then you go, I'll go. I'll get my kids an apartment, I'll be good, and it was...it was bad.

HT: I appreciate you being open to sharing that.

SB: That's no problem. It's marriage. It's...it's difficult. You know, people with profound insights on life know not to do it. Just being honest.

PB: Y'all have any questions? [pause]

SB: Okay.

PB: Thank you so much.

SB: No problem.