

**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

**Curt Guyette**

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER AND ORIANA YILMA

May 3, 2019

Detroit, Michigan

## Narrator

Curt Guyette was born and raised in Pennsylvania. He is a journalist who worked for an alternative paper in Sacramento, California before moving to Detroit to work for the Detroit Metro Times in 1995. In 2013, he began working as an investigative reporter for the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) in Michigan.

## 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.

Oriana Yilma is an undergraduate student at Wayne State University majoring in Psychology and minoring in African American Studies.

## Abstract

Curt Guyette discusses his personal background, his education, how he ended up in Detroit, how the city has changed since he moved here, and how working in Detroit changed prejudices that he had grown up with. He talks about why alternative media matters, his journalistic philosophy and influences on his journalism, and the role that journalists should play in social movements. He talks about his reporting on such topics as education, emergency management, the campaign to repeal the emergency manager law, the foreclosure crisis, the Ilitches, Matty Moroun, the Detroit bankruptcy, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, water shutoffs, water affordability, and the Flint Water Crisis. Major themes include how racism, classism, and population decline created structural issues that are the root of Detroit's problems and his fear that Detroit is becoming an oligarchy.

## Keywords

Advocacy journalism; Alternative media; American Civil Liberties Union; Charter schools; Detroit bankruptcy; Detroit Metro Times; Detroit Public Schools; Detroit Water and Sewerage Department; Detroit, Michigan; Education; Emergency management; Flint water crisis; Flint, Michigan; Foreclosure crisis; Great Recession; Journalism; Labor unions; Racism; Water affordability; Water shutoffs;

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Transcript of interview conducted May 3, 2019 with:

Curt Guyette [CG]

Detroit, MI

By: Peter Blackmer [PB] and Oriana Yilma [OY]

[Pre-interview conversation begins]

**PB:** Jerry Goldberg was in here this morning. And so, we talked to him -

**CG:** Yeah, Jerry's great.

**PB:** Yeah.

**CG:** Yeah, Jerry single-handedly saved the city over a couple hundred million dollars in the bankruptcy.

**PB:** Wow.

**CG:** Yeah.

**PB:** Why do you... I mean, could you say more about that?

**CG:** Sure.

**PB:** Was it... Like, what was his specific role and...

**CG:** Well, he was representing one of the retirees, and what he was raising issue is that, for one thing, Jones Day had as clients banks that were creditors, and there was a point where the...the banks were asking to be, you know, recoup losses, but it was based on a deal that was probably illegal. And then, bankruptcy judge [Steven Rhodes] said if the city were to sue these banks, they would probably win. And, you... Literally, Jones Day was the law firm, the lead law firm, representing the city in the bankruptcy, but it also had as its clients banks that were creditors, and the banks actually had to sign conflict of interest waivers allowing the city to--or allowing Jones Day to represent the city, but they said they would just do it. Like, in bankruptcy court if they were--if the city were--to sue, that they...they had to come back to ask permission. They weren't giving permission for that. That's how intertwined everything was. And, it had to do with the...the way it was...the structure that the city was getting loans for pension stuff, and they were loans that were actually exceeding the limits. So, there was things that were going on that, like I said, the judge said if the city were to sue, they would likely win.

And, Jones Day kept cutting deals with the banks, and twice, like, they came to the table with the deal they had worked out, and Jerry objected saying it was too beneficial, especially given the circumstances as if we were to sue, we would not only, you know, not have to repay this money but maybe get back, you know, millions, hundreds of millions of dollars that had been paid to the banks. And twice, the bankruptcy judge agreed with Jerry saying this is...this is too good a deal for the banks. Go back to the bargaining table. That happened twice, and...and so there's, like, really significant amount of money that Jerry, you know, going up against these...these thousand-dollar-an-hour Jones Day attorneys and all the other attorneys that were involved in it. You know, Jerry, this private practice, sole practitioner guy that is definitely not a thousand-dollar-an-hour lawyer, you know, he's the people's lawyer, you know, helping prevent foreclosures and things like that, he stood up against them and won a really significant victory for the city, which I sort of think goes to part of the heart of the issue involving Jones Day.

I think that you can make the argument that the city itself was not really represented in bankruptcy. The state was represented because they were...it was through the state and the appointment of the emergency manager that Detroit [Michigan] was taken into bankruptcy. So, it was the state's person in the form of the receiver, the emergency manager, and also using Jones Day. And so, you know the state's interests were being looked out for. You know the creditors' interests were being looked out for. But how much was the city's interests really being looked out for?

And, I think that showed in the...how retirees far and away were the ones who really paid the price for the bankruptcy, far more than the bond holders ever did. It was all, you know. I would say 75 percent of the money saved in the bankruptcy was on the backs of retirees, mostly in the form of taking away their healthcare. You know, they went from having a very good Blue Cross Blue Shield healthcare that was provided to them to them getting \$125 a month stipend. You know, some of those people, they ended up having to pay, you know, a thousand dollars a month for their insurance. So, that was...that was a huge, huge burden and harm placed...placed on them. When they had worked all their lives, when they were negotiating their contracts, well, we might take less money in my pocket now for in the future knowing that when I retire I'm gonna have good healthcare. I won't have to worry about my healthcare. And then, that's just taken away from them.

The...there was a fundamental unfairness in that bankruptcy that, you know, maybe it was legal, but it was certainly not fair or just, and that was part of the whole intent, you know. Jones Day prior to that, you know, lawyers for Jones Day were writing papers for legal journals saying how they thought that chapter... [audio cuts out] ...had chosen to lead the city through bankruptcy. It was also the reason that they did what they did with P.A. [Public Act] 436, the emergency manager law. Because as...as soon as they had citizens started to gather petition signatures to put a referendum on the ballot to overturn or repeal P.A. Four, the first emergency manager law, there was meetings at the highest levels of state government as to what are we going to do if this is successful? I mean, as soon as they started gathering the petitions, it's like, what are we going to do if they're successful? And, Jones Day was in on those meetings, and what they decided to do is exactly what they ended up doing. If, you know, the citizens of Michigan go

to the polls and reject this emergency manager law because it takes away democracy, what we'll do is come back with a law that essentially does what we want it to do, but we will attach an appropriation to it which will then make it referendum-proof.

So, you know, the attack on democracy is almost mind-boggling when you...when you think about it. You have this law that's implemented that takes away democracy, right? When you appoint an emergency manager, local, duly elected local officials lose all their power, and whatever power they might get going forward is based on whatever the emergency manager decided to give them, but they have zero authority even though they've been duly elected. It's all...all the power rests in the hands of the emergency manager, and that is the only way to get to bankruptcy. At least under that law, you have to have an emergency manager in place in order to declare bankruptcy. So, it was set up so that the state would be in control of the bankruptcy process, I think, with the intent of...that they knew that they were going to take Detroit into bankruptcy. That was the primary--or one of the primary--purposes of it. There's not documentation of it, but looking back that seems pretty clear what it was, and that is why they were so adamant and so concerned about what would happen if the voters repealed the first emergency manager law, which is what they did.

And then, they come back in a lame duck session of the legislature within weeks of it just being rejected by voters and come back with a law that in many ways mirrors the one that was just rejected but do it in a way that is no longer subject to the same democratic process that removed the previous law. It's like they just jammed it down the throats of the people of Michigan, just jammed it down their throats even though they...they didn't want it because they knew that just, I think almost instinctually, that, you know, we've raised from the time that we're little kids, democracy is the best form of government, and, no, it's not a good thing to take away democracy, and that's exactly what this law did. And, we saw just how horrible those consequences can be when you do that with what happened in Flint [Michigan].

**PB:** Are we rolling?

**Herbert Taylor [HT]:** The audio was going, but not the video.

**PB:** Okay. So, are we ready to go?

**HT:** Yes.

[Pre-interview conversation ends]

**OY:** Can you give us your name, where you live, and any organizations or affiliations?

[0:00:00]

**CG:** Sure, my given name is Curtis William Guyette, Jr. I go by Curt Guyette. I grew up in central Pennsylvania, north-central Pennsylvania, kind of the middle of nowhere [laughs] in Pennsylvania, hours and hours away from any place of, you know, that people know. And now, I work for the American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan as an investigative reporter. When I was hired by the ACLU, I was hired specifically to re--investigate and report on Michigan's emergency manager law because it does take away democracy, which is--and protecting democracy is the focal point of the ACLU. And so, it was kind of an experiment, really, hiring me. No ACLU affiliate had ever had someone that was designated as an investigative reporter working in that capacity on staff.

[0:01:25]

**OY:** Could you describe your neighborhood when you first got here?

**CG:** Well, I live in St. Clair Shores [Michigan], and we moved here, my family, which was my wife at the time and my two children who were, I think, four or five years old. We were living in Sacramento, California. I was working for an alternative newspaper there and got hired by the Detroit Metro Times alternative paper, and



we moved here sight unseen, completely, just packed everything up into a moving van and came here, and my wife was the one that was in charge of finding where we were gonna live. And once she started calling around to the realtors, what the consistent message that she got was, well, you want to stay north of Eight Mile, and we didn't realize at the time, well, that was the code for stay out of Detroit [Michigan]. And...and so, we almost in a way threw a dart in terms of, well, I don't want to live more than a half-hour commute, place that's safe, schools are good, but also affordable, and my wife wanted to live close to the water, so we ended up in St. Clair Shores, which is I guess an inner-ring suburb on the East Side.

[0:03:02]

**OY:** How has Detroit changed since when you first got here?

**CG:** Well, I came here in [19]95, and that was pretty close to being the, I think, low point in...or at the...continuing the decline...certainly, that's--let me take that back. So, I'll start over. So, we came here in 1995, and things were bad in the city then. There had been... I would say the population decline started sometime in the...probably around the mid-1950s. So, there had been nothing but decline, you know, since then, and the decline continued for almost the whole time since I've...I've been here. It might be right now it's a situation where the influx is...is equally the outflux, but I still think there's not any population growth. But at least, like, finally, the loss has been stemmed. And so, there's probably a point of some equilibrium right now. But, I forget what the population was when I came here. It was certainly over a million, and the last time I looked, it was 675,000 people living here? So, even during that period, a huge, huge population loss, and, you know, at the peak it was almost two million people here. So, you know, since the 1950s, it went from almost two million people to well under 700,000, which is, you know, part of the key is to everything that Detroit's dealing with is that massive, massive population loss and all the racism that is connected to that and all the economic devastation that flows from that.

[0:05:21]

**OY:** How did you first start reporting on issues of racial and social justice?

**CG:** Well, so alternative newspapers for the most part are openly liberal, and it's different than traditional mainstream media which is the...the mantra is objectivity. And when I first started working for an alternative newspaper, which was 1990 in Sacramento, my editor there, we had a discussion early on as talked about objectivity, and she said, "You know, I don't really expect you to be objective. I don't actually think true objectivity is...is really possible. What I do want you to do, and what I expect you to do, is to be fair." And, that was...that was kind of, like, an opening [laughs] up for me. That was...that was like, oh my gosh. That just makes so much more sense than, like, giving equal balance to two sides when there's not necessarily equal balance there.

Like, I use climate change as an example. For a long, long time--and still to some extent it still can happen--but it was like equal weight was being given to the science behind climate change and the climate change deniers. It was like these say this, these say this. But, that...there was not really any truly equal sides in that debate, you know. One side's head was filled with sound science, and the other side was mostly being funded by the fossil fuel industry and interests that wanted to protect the status quo. So, you're really doing a disservice to your readers or your viewers if you treat those like they're both equally valid. Whereas in the alternative press, we felt like, "Well, this side says this. This side says this, but, you know, this side is full of shit because here's the real deal." So, you didn't have to be--pretend to be objective and...and...and give, really, a false idea of what it is when you...when you do that.

And so, it was really liberating to just feel like we could do that. And plus, I'm liberal. I don't have to pretend not to be liberal, and that was also liberating. I didn't have to pretend to be anything other than what I was. But, sort of like the flipside of that is that, say as an investigative reporter, what my...what would drive me to want to pursue a particular story might be my liberal leanings, but that once you do that, then the cards fall where the cards fall because the most important thing in terms of being successful as a journalist is...is credibility. If you don't have credibility, you're really worth zero. And so, you cannot be a propagandist, right? You cannot just tell one side of the story. You really do have to...the fairness part of it is intrinsic to that. So--and to be credible, to be able to back up what you say

with documentations or, you know, evidence to show that you're not a propagandist. And, you know, it can be tricky sometimes, but you have--as a journalist--you have to come down on the side of accuracy and fairness and honesty. Yeah. So, did that answer your question? I don't know for sure that it did.

[0:09:23]

**OY:** I think it did.

**CG:** I...I can't say. So, in a way I think part of what you're asking is, like, where do my liberal tendencies come from.

**OY:** Yeah, kind of.

**CG:** And, you know, part of it is, you know, I grew up in a household where, you know, it was definitely working class. I was the first person in my family that ever went to college.

**OY:** Okay.

**CG:** My paternal grandfather worked as a printer in the print shop of a newspaper. My father was a Pennsylvania state policeman, ended up being a detective and investigator. So, but unionism was strong in my family. My grandfather was the kind of guy if it didn't have a union label on it, it didn't come into the house, you know. It was... He was a true blue union guy. And... But probably, what affected me as much as anything was I have a younger brother who got diabetes when he was nine months old and so has been dealing with a disability his whole life, and one of the things being exposed to that from a young age--I was like four years old probably when he...he got sick--was just knowing that there are people in life that don't get a fair shake through no fault of their own, you know. They have a much tougher road to travel than other people through no fault of their own, and it's our obligation as a society to help, and I think that's kinda the foundation of, you

know, liberal philosophy, you know. We're all in it together. We all need to help each other. Those who are better off need to help those that aren't.

And...and so, that's all...all part of it. So, I would say that part is ingrained in me, but the other part is just being educated. I think education in a way... At least, good educations are kind of liberalizing. You're exposed to new ideas. You're exposed to--gosh, I remember just being in a...a linguistics class, and the...the topic was...was Black English, and I was sitting in class. I made a statement, just like, seems like lazy to me, right? And, the teacher called me out on it and said, you know, like, "Here's where you're wrong," and it, you know, explained, like, the whole how the development of Black English came, was like pidgin language. You know, you start taking... When your native language is something else, and you're learning a new language, it develops in a different way than if you are a native. That's your native language. But just, I learned, right? I had an ingrained bigotry, you know, not through malice, just where I grew up I didn't know people of color until I went away to college. I grew up in a...a part of the country that was all white. You know, there was very few Jewish people where I grew up, you know. Where I grew up it was like, oh, are you Catholic or Protestant? It's a little bit interesting to me that it's almost whatever the situation is, the human condition, differences are gonna come up, right? And then, you pull out, and those differences are less important than other differences.

But, part of it is, I mean, I grew up with all these ingrained prejudices and...and...and bigotry through the circumstances. My house, like, the N-word was never used in my house. So, I didn't grow up prejudiced in that way, but just the circumstances, it's unavoidable. Like, one of my co-workers was a brilliant African-American guy, Mark Fancher, and I learned from Mark, you know, if you are white, it's really impossible not to be racist. And, you know, by that he doesn't mean overtly racist like we're seeing like white supremacists, but it's almost like ingrained. This idea of superiority is...is...is...you learn it kind of through osmosis because it's just kind of assumed, you know, just how things are projected in media and everything.

And so, in terms of me coming to Detroit and in terms of personal growth, it was the best thing that ever happened to me. You know, I'm gonna go to a city that is majority African-American. Even though I haven't lived here, I've certainly worked

here and, you know, spent a huge part of my life here and almost like living here in that sense is, you know, embedded here and experiencing it and...and, you know, learning of all these different things about racism. And then, that learning was accelerated going to work at the ACLU where it was very consciously an issue that we continue to try to address, both--not just in terms of diversity of the staff, but these other issues of, you know, white majority in society and minorities and everything that goes on between that and how complicated it is. It's, you know.

[0:15:45]

**OY:** What have been some of the greatest influences on your journalism?

**CG:** Hmm. Well, I... Going to work for the alternative press. It was a blessing for me. Like I had said, it was liberating to get out of the yoke of...of the objectivity that is pounded into you in journalism school and whatever mainstream paper you're working at. So, finding the alternative press. And then, within the alternative press, you know, I learned to look at things outside of the lens of the mainstream. One thing about the alternate press, like when I became an editor and was working with other reporters, it's like, look. It...we're...I take seriously the alternative part of alternative press, which means that you have to be offering an alternative to your readers. What does that mean? Well, to me, that means either you are covering things that other people aren't covering, or you're covering things that other people are covering but you're covering it in a way that they're not covering it. And, I think some of the work I did around the bankruptcy is a really good example of that. I think that I provided a take on the bankruptcy that was not really being put out into the mainstream. And so, I think that that influence, you know, absolutely altered, you know, my career path as a journalist.

[0:17:29]

**OY:** What does racism look like in Detroit today?

**CG:** Oh, that--I...I think that this... When I moved here, my sense was that the racism here was more intense than any I had ever encountered outside of New Orleans [Louisiana]. When I was a young man, I quit college and just went down to New Orleans, and the racism there was open and vile, you know, in some ways. In some ways, New Orleans was like a melting pot kind of place, but in other ways it was--like, I worked in a restaurant that had only recently allowed African Americans to work as servers or cashiers. It was like the...the front half was white, and then there was a Black head chef who wouldn't hire white people, you know. It was like--but I think it was, well, if they're not gonna hire Black people to work in the front, then I'm not hiring white people to work back in the kitchen, you know. It was that.

But, you know, what you find in Macomb County [Michigan]--and it was not just when I first came here. It still exists today. I mean, I think there's a reason that [Donald] Trump had such a strong showing in parts of Michigan. This is, you know, the most racially segregated metropolitan area in America. It was that way when I moved here, and it's still that way, and that... I think that a lot of people are very comfortable with being open with their racism. And, you know, the flip side of that, the word isn't racism, but, you know, there's African American people that just don't like white people, and, you know, they express that. I don't think that that's the overwhelming view, but there's certainly that aspect here as well. Not saying it's unjustified, but that it is...you can definitely feel that anger among some of the African Americans living in Detroit towards white people. And, that's...that's part of it...part of it is well. I don't think it's the major part, certainly not the most significant part, but it...it's there. I feel it sometimes.

But, you know, my attitude has always been--this sounds a little bit corny probably--but like, if you go forward with, like, a good heart, even if you're wrong about something, if your intentions are good, and you're willing to learn about stuff, people will recognize that. And...and plus, if you're fair, people--and really fair, right? Or, willing to talk about things. You know, for a lot of my career, I would write about things like how minority people are being disproportionately affected by things, and I think that gets recognized and appreciated.

But, I also think that I have a little bit of an issue with talking about, like, just the race aspect of it because I also think it's a class issue as well, and that there

definitely is, you know, people of color are negatively impacted by...by the racism. But especially economically, what I see is going on, it's not just people of color. The people that are greedy want everybody's money, not just that money of people of color, and they might be the easiest targets and the easiest ones to go after, but it's really below a certain class, everybody is being affected by the economics that this country has...economic policies that this country's been, for the most part, pursuing, you know, ever since the [Ronald] Reagan Era. The middle class is getting hammered and continues to get hammered, and those...those economic policies affect everybody, and you see it in issues like, oh, not having money for insurance or to--for your car, and so you ended up getting arrested, and then you get fined for that. And, that is certainly, like, Detroit is being hit by that harder than anybody else, and so people of color have been hit by that harder than anybody else. But a lot of this stuff that's going on, it's...it's...it's poor people in general that are being affected as well. So, I think the--like, when I talk about things, I talk about the race issue but also include class because I think that's important not to leave that out.

[0:23:08]

**OY:** Can you talk about the kind of stories you were drawn to in your years with the [Detroit] Metro Times?

**CG:** Well, I liked, you know, stories about underdogs, which is part of my, I think, my... The way I feel about Detroit is... Certainly since I've been here, it's been an underdog city, right? It's been a city that's been dealing with all these things that so much is working against it, and for individuals too, individuals that were, you know, being abused by people more powerful than them, by systems more...more powerful than them. I felt like, you know, they need someone on their side, and who else was...was...was gonna do it? Someone had to be helping to stick up for them, even if it's not doing anything more than telling their stories. But, the...that was always very important to me, and I think I'm not unique in that respect. I think a lot of journalists are driven by that. But, you know, just the unfairness of things, right? If you see things that are unfair, that's part of what journalism is supposed to do, you know, the old saying, "Comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable." [laughs] I took that to heart. [laughs]

[0:24:43]

**PB:** So, you came in there at... [says something quietly to someone off-camera] So, you came into Metro Times just ahead of the state takeover of the public schools. Could you kind of give us a crash course on that history? So, from [19]99 when the state took over and the reporting that you did around that.

**CG:** Yeah, although I somewhat disagree that it was a state takeover. I mean, it happened. The state created the situation, but it was the mayor--I think. I could be wrong about this, and I hope it's not included if I am wrong. But, my recollection of that is that it was the mayor that appointed the board. So, it was...democracy was taken away, but it was not completely a state takeover, certainly not to the same degree as what happened when first [Jennifer] Granholm appointed an emergency financial manager and then [Rick] Snyder appointed an emergency manager who had complete control. So, it was a much... It was not...not the same. So, I would quibble a little bit. I think that it should rightly be called a state takeover. Certainly, the state engineered a change in the governance of the Detroit Public Schools, and that there was a lot of bond money, and so that determined who it was that figured out how that bond money was spent, you know.

And, if I could take just a step back. The first thing I wrote about when I came here, the owner of the paper at the time--John Engler was governor--he thought Engler was being talked about as a possible vice presidential nominee for the Republicans. So, he said, "Curt, I want you to just start investigating him, and I want us to build up a body of work so if he does become a vice presidential candidate, national media, they're gonna have to cite us. They'll say 'as reported in the Metro Times.'" He wanted us to be ahead of the curve.

And, one of the first stories I did was about what was going on with changes in the education system under Engler, which then led me to groups like the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, which is a, you know, free-market think tank, and I was able to disclose the role that the DeVos family was playing in what they were seeking to do in terms of changes to education because they were pushing charters, and charters have had unbelievable impact on Detroit, and I was able to



show how they were funding various non-profits that were seemingly not connected but were connected by virtue of the fact that they were all receiving DeVos money, and they were all trying to dismantle the state's education system and to create a charter system. And, their ultimate goal was really to get vouchers in place so that taxpayers would be funding sending their kids to private schools and religious schools because the thing about the DeVoses is that they are fundamentalist Christians and fiercely advocates of free-market capitalism and also staunch, staunch Republicans, and what they were attempting to do in terms of education, it's win, win, win for them when they're successful. If you start charter schools that are for profit and publicly funded and that--then, they win, right? They're pursuing their goal of free market, which is, I would say, there's no way that anybody should be making money off of public education. All that money should be going into education and not profiting from it in a free market sense, which is what they want.

As a result of part of what they pursued, you know, I think Michigan has more for-profit charters than anyplace else in America. Because they have so much money, and they're able to be relentless, they can lose and lose and lose and keep coming back and coming back because they have almost unlimited amount of money to keep pouring into it. And, what they were doing was very systematically going about fostering these charter schools when people were saying, "This is gonna be a disaster. This is gonna be a disaster." And, it's--look what's happened to education in Detroit as a result. And, part of what they kept saying is, "Oh, we're doing this to help the Black kids in Detroit." That's the...they were openly saying that. And, no. What they did was...was continued the assault on public education 'cause the other thing that they want to do is weaken the power of teachers' unions. With the decline of the auto industry, teachers' unions became the strongest liberal force in Michigan politics as the UAW's [United Auto Workers'] power declined. So, by creating charter schools that actively prohibited unionization and having teachers migrate towards that, then you are significantly reducing the power and influence that teachers' unions have, which is, along with wanting to better the lives of teachers, really did spend a lot of their energy and resources on making schools in general better, or as good as possible. And so, what the DeVoses did was...abetted that.

And now, we have Betsy DeVos as the Secretary of Education. And, it's funny. Engler never ended up being the vice presidential candidate, but when Betsy

DeVos was nominated to be the Secretary of Education, some of that work that I did back in 1996 was used to show where Betsy DeVos and her family was coming from and how they did what they did. So, it ended up doing what he hoped it would do, but it was, you know, two decades later.

[0:32:13]

**PB:** So, in your analysis, is it fair... What I'm hearing is that the schools, the privatization and charterization of public schools in Detroit isn't an object for the DeVos family. That's more of a strategy towards an ultimate support--an opening up of the privatization of public assets.

**CG:** Yep.

**PB:** Is that a fair...

**CG:** Yes. Do you want me to reiterate that?

**PB:** Yeah. Could you?

**CG:** So, I mean, really what they were about, one of the things that they were about in terms of education was the privatization of public assets. That's very much what they are about and continue to pursue it. They did at one point try to get the state to change its constitution so we would have a voucher system, and that got rejected, you know, because their values are contrary to, I think, mainstream American values. But because of their vast, vast wealth, they are able to, you know--at one point, I think they decided, gosh, we've got to quit going to these ballot measures. We're just gonna start buying politicians and influencing things that way and then go to the legislatures and have legislatures do their bidding because they were not being successful going to the people. Dick DeVos, Betsy's husband, ran for governor. Got pretty soundly defeated. I think in general,

their policies are not the policies that the majority of Americans want, but they are able to use their wealth to influence things.

And then, you know, talk about where I come from politically, you know, you see that wealth, and you start changing the scales. And then, the more you change the scales, the more it keeps going your way. The more money you get, the more influence you get, the more ability and resources you have to keep things going in your way, and that's part of... It gets back to what we've been seeing going on in this country, and the disparity in wealth that's been going on certainly since Reagan. It's all part and parcel of that.

[0:34:34]

**PB:** So, can you talk a little about--moving beyond the DeVos family--about the impacts that you observed as you're reporting on public schools that emergency financial managers had on the different school districts?

**CG:** Yep. So--and I'm more well-versed in the emergency manager stuff than what was going on in [19]99, but I think part and parcel of it all... I think at the heart of it all--and it gets back to racism, but also the abandonment of the city. It's not a managerial problem, it's a structural problem. And, that's... I think racism comes into play, and I'm a little bit uncomfortable saying things like this, but I feel like I had to say it because I think it's reality. Part of the racism is when you talk to, like, white people, racists living in the suburbs, what they'll say is, "Detroit's problems are because [air quotes] 'those people' can't handle their own business," right, that either they are too corrupt or too incompetent to run things right. But, the reason that Detroit is in this dire situation it was in is because those people cannot run their own business.

So, racism gives them an inaccurate view of reality because it really was--the situation was--caused by racism. The structural situation was caused by racism beginning like in the [19]50s as the, you know, tax dollars were used to build the interstate highways that a lot of times when they were built decimated African-American neighborhoods as it did in Detroit. And then, people can use

those roads to easily commute from the suburbs that were springing up. And then, they could buy homes in those suburbs using, you know, federal subsidized home loans, but people of color were not able to get those. And so, white people were being subsidized to move out of the city. And then as they took advantage of those subsidies that people of color could not, the population decline then causes erosion of the tax base, erosion of the tax base causes erosion of services, erosion of services causes more people to want to leave. And then, you just create this downward spiral.

That is not a managerial problem. No one could manage their way out of a situation created when you go from, you know, 1.8 million to 700,000, you know. No one can manage their way out of that. That's a structural problem. And, that is the--I think--a fundamental flaw in the emergency manager law. It's in there in the name itself: manager, right? So if we can just, you know, take democracy away from those people, you know, bring in the pros that know what they're doing, then they'll clean things up from a managerial point of view, and everything will be fine.

And, there's no example more clear of the fallacy of that than Detroit Public Schools and what happened with the state takeover, especially beginning in 2009 with the appointment of an emergency financial manager. And, the reason it changed from an emergency financial manager to an emergency manager was at one point, the Granholm--a Democrat--appointed emergency financial manager over Detroit Public Schools was looking to expand his power and tried making decisions regarding curriculum. The elected School Board--because they still had power because the emergency financial manager law was not as extensive as the law that came after was--the School Board still had money to pay an attorney to sue saying, no, the emergency financial manager is overstepping his bounds. Curriculum is still our area. Keep your hands off. And, the court agreed.

The consequence of that was then Snyder came in and pushed P.A. [Public Act] Four, the emergency manager law, which took out the word "financial" to indicate the much more sweeping scope of that, and that was a direct reaction to the Detroit elected School Board exercising its authority and...and...and fighting back. So then, they brought in this new law, which the School Board didn't have the power to do that because the emergency manager would say, "I'm not giving you

money for a lawyer to sue me.” And so, because the P.A. 4 took away all of the power of elected officials, and the emergency managers had, in terms of municipalities, they had the authority to create new ordinances. They could abolish existing ordinances. They could sell off public assets. They could break collective bargaining agreements. Basically, they could do whatever they wanted, and there was no checks and balances. The only thing, the one thing the law says that they cannot do is miss a bond payment, right? Which tells you the exact purpose of that law, which is to make sure that the banks get paid no matter what. No matter what you have to do, no matter what you have to cut, no matter what you have to sell off, just make sure that the banks get paid. And, that was...that was the purpose of the emergency manager law.

But back to the schools, because it was a structural problem because, okay, first of all, the charter schools were draining students. Because the system is set up as the money follows the students, every student that was leaving Detroit Public Schools for a charter school was harming traditional public schools, and it was harming it in ways that aren't always apparent. Most of the charter schools tend to be elementary schools. They don't...you don't have a lot of charter high schools, and the reason for that is that it's more expensive to teach high schoolers than it is grade schoolers. And traditional public schools, because it's like you get 7,500 dollars or, you know, however much it is per student, they could take that money and spread it around. So like, in the system maybe we're only spending \$6,000 on the elementary school students, but that extra \$1,500 then we put into the high schools because it's more expensive. So when you are taking away all those elementary school students, the ones who are not as expensive to teach, then it makes it doubly difficult to make sure that within your system the money is being disbursed the way it is most effective.

So, you know, that was the kind of harm that's not...it wasn't apparent to me until, you know, I started researching and looking into it. It's kind of a devious way that, oh, yeah, charters are only doing elementary schools because that's where the money...more profits in the elementary schools, and it doubly hurts the traditional schools. Just as the traditional schools are the ones that by and large end up being the ones that have to educate special needs kids who are much, much more...cost a lot more to give them the additional services that they need to educate them to the best extent possible.

And so, the charter schools--but before the charter schools was just the exodus. When you're losing these students, you still have these schools, but instead of having, you know, 1,000 neighborhood kids in that school, now you only have 500. What do you do with all this extra space? I still have to heat the whole building. We can't afford to do it with this many students. So, you know, that gets back to the whole structural problem. The structural problem was directly related to the exodus from the city and charter schools, you know, all of which gets back to the underlying racism that was driving so much of this, and racist policies.

[0:43:57]

**PB:** Do you recall... I read some of your articles.

**CG:** Oh, can I just go back one step? So, I was saying how the fallacy behind the...the...the emergency manager law, Detroit Public Schools is the clearest example, and here's why I say that. When--I haven't looked at it recently, but when I was writing a lot about it, under six years of state control that began in 2009--2009--Detroit Public Schools went at least 500 millions dollars deeper in debt, okay? And, that's giving unlimited control to these emergency managers. If they have unlimited control, if they're the ones that are supposed to be not influenced by outside interest, they're supposed to be incorruptible, you know, all of the things that they say is wrong with the way things were being run under a democratic system, if they drive the district 500 million dollars deeper into debt, that shows you it's a structural problem and not a managerial problem.

[0:45:16]

**PB:** I mean, what does that tell you about the nature of emergency managers, like, more broadly? I guess, like, what conclusions do you reach from...

**CG:** At the--I think what that says is that the whole underpinnings of the emergency manager are wrong, that it's built on a false assumption, that it is

managerial rather than structural problems. And then, failure to recognize those structural problems means that you're not fixing anything, you know. You're...you're...you're coming in, and you're selling off assets and...and...and maybe balancing the books for right now, but right now the economy's been growing since the...the crash of [20]07, [20]08. You know, we've had a decade of economic growth, and part of the consequence of that is now there are no cities or school districts that are under the control of an emergency manager. But, what happens when the economy tanks again? There's going to be a lot of school districts and municipalities back in the same boat, and they're gonna be even worse off than before because now they don't have all these assets that they had before so it's gonna be even worse.

The...the other thing is that--related to emergency management with cities--is that part of what... Along with the crash which then decimated the tax base of these cities, the Snyder administration took revenue sharing away from all these cities. So, it's like they're already... I think about it like in the old movies, you know, a lot of times it would be these situations where, you know, someone is like dangling on the edge of a cliff, and a shadow comes into the frame, and you don't know if it's going to be somebody...a good guy who's gonna reach down and pull that person up and save them or come along and start stomping on their fingers so that they, you know, fall to their death. And, what the Snyder administration did when all these municipalities were just hanging by their fingers was to come in and start stomping on their fingers by taking away revenue sharing. So, if they had any chance at all of making it, that was...that was just pushing them over the edge, and Detroit was one of those cities. Flint was another one of those cities that massive amounts of revenue sharing were taken away from them guaranteeing that they were not going to be able to remain solvent. I'm sorry. I interrupted your question.

[0:47:52]

**PB:** No, no. That's great. Yeah, I think that that was a really helpful description to visualize that kind of role of revenue sharing, so I'm glad you brought that up. We can spend hours just talking about education, but I want to make sure we get through some other stuff as well. So, right at this period you're describing where charters are driving a wedge into the city's public school industry, emergency

financial managers are coming and driving up the debt of the school district at the same period where there's the Great Recession and the subprime lending crisis, and I know that was a lot of your reporting as well for the Metro Times. So, could you talk a little bit about your reporting on those issues as well?

**CG:** Yeah. It was not so much my personal reporting but the paper's in general. I was a news editor involved in it. And in a way, the subprime mortgage crisis hit Detroit before it hit the rest of America, in large part because they were targeting people of color. You know, people who were less educated that could not understand what was really going on where they would come in and say, "Gosh, your house needs a new roof. You can use 10,000 dollars. You have a lot of equity in your house. You can get the money out of that. Here's this deal for you." And, it would be, you know, typical almost bait-and-switch situation where you'd have low rates in the beginning and then--[coughs] excuse me--you have low rates in the beginning, but then you hit a balloon payment, and you're gonna lose your house. And, they preyed on elderly people. They preyed on people who had difficulty reading, understanding the contracts they were getting into, and they--we know now from investigations that were conducted after the crash that they were deliberately targeting minority neighborhoods.

And so, Detroit was...was a focus of that. And then, the crash hit. And then, you have massive foreclosures, but it was not just mortgage foreclosures because then we've also seen tax foreclosures, illegal, as it turned out. Illegal tax foreclosures. And, this is the result of an ACLU case that it's beyond dispute that after the crash what the city should've done was reappraised every house at its actual value. And, you know, in Detroit we saw a lot of neighborhoods--now, you know, not the most well-to-do neighborhoods, not the worst neighborhoods, but more like the middle-class neighborhoods where there were 100,000 dollar homes at that point, 80,000 dollar homes. Those homes went down to 10,000 dollars in a lot of cases, and...but yet those people were still being forced to pay taxes as if those homes were still worth 80,000 dollars or 100,000 dollars, and they couldn't keep up with it because a lot of them lost their jobs as a result of the crash. And so, they were being taken away wrongly.

The other thing is that the city had in place a poverty exemption. You could have your taxes reduced by half or even completely if you were below the poverty line



or at the poverty line, if you were poor, and the city was not publicizing that, and if someone found out about it and came to the city, the city was deliberately throwing needless obstacles up in order to prevent people from saving their homes. You know? It's outrageous. It's horrendous that they would wrongly take people's homes. At least in some ways, capitalists, you kind of expected it of them, right? They want to make money no matter what the human costs are to their profit making. But, the government that is supposed to be there serving you illegally taking away people's homes.

And then, the consequence of it is you're driving more people out of the city. How much of this population exodus is due to all these foreclosures and then people just moving away? That's part of the reason that the population declined since [19]95, since I've been here. That's been a big part of it, along with closing schools. You know, especially if you don't have money for a car, you want to live close to your school. Well, they close down your neighborhood school, you're gonna move. Well, I'll move to a place that's...that's safer, where my taxes are less, whatever it is. So, a lot of it has been not the racism of the past or the structural inequities of the past but the policies of the county and city government that have added...added to the problem of it, and it's just all so unjust and so unfair.

You know, in some ways, like when there would be projects and they would take people's property through eminent domain, at least those people got compensated something for that. This, you not only don't get anything, you lose everything you had. You lose your home. That's all the value, you know, the wealth that you have to pass on to your kids. That's now gone. So, it's...it's...it's--and so, now what do you have?

And, this is the one other thing--and this one drives me as crazy as anything--is that as a way to try to help keep people in their homes, the federal government was giving cities like Detroit, you know, hundreds of millions of dollars to help keep people in their homes. What did Detroit do with that money? They put that money into demolishing homes that were already vacated. So, what does that do? If you're not helping keep someone in their home, if you're using that money to demolish a home that's already vacant, then what you're gonna have is more people losing their homes and more homes that you have to tear down at 15,000 dollars a pop. You're paying more to pay down--tear down homes than...than

what they were worth in terms of monetary value, but they were worth a lot to the people that were living there. You know, they could afford to, you know, live there if their, you know, taxes weren't illegally elevated. It's just...it's just insane to me. It's absolutely insane to me that you would spend money tearing down homes instead of helping people stay in homes in order to prevent having more homes to have to tear down. It's unconscionable.

[0:55:15]

**PB:** Do you recall specific stories while you were at the Metro Times about either school closures and people impacted or foreclosures and evictions and people who were impacted by those?

**CG:** The... We did... I know very early on in the early 2000s, one of our reporters did a really good job about the predatory lending and the effects it was having. Here's something I wrote about, which is that the state changing the amount of time that it would take in order to do a tax foreclosure. They...they reduced it, you know, if you--to the point where if you are two years behind in your taxes then they can start the process to take your home. Two or three years. I could be wrong on the two years, but it was either two or three years.

And then, they also created usurious interest rates for people that are behind on their taxes, and housing advocates--I remember sitting in a meeting with housing advocates that said, "This is what this is gonna do. This is just gonna cause more people to lose their homes. If you shorten the amount of time that they have to pay their taxes, if you put interest rates--first of all, they're having trouble paying their taxes, and what do you do in response to that? Jack up the interest rates for when they're behind on their taxes? You're just guaranteeing those people are gonna lose their homes." That was a policy by the state that the...the advocates said at the time, "This is what's gonna happen if you do that," and they proved to be absolutely right, you know. It was designed to take people's homes away from them, and it could be no other, no other rationale for pursuing those kinds of policies, especially when people tell you, "If you do this, this is what it's gonna do," and then you do it, and what they warned against happens. It was not just predictable, it was predicted. But, they did it anyhow.

[0:57:39]

**PB:** So, you mentioned that you're sitting in a space with housing organizers and activists. What is... While you're reporting on and the Metro Times was reporting on these kinds of stories, what kind of relationships did you have with organizers and activists? Because I know that in this period--well, really over the last, like, 20 years, the Metro Times and the Michigan Citizen have had the best coverage of organizing work in this city.

**CG:** Yeah, well, part of it goes to what I talked about earlier, is giving coverage to the people that don't get coverage, you know. A lot of coverage is geared toward the powerful, and part of it is access, right? Like, a lot of reporters think, "I need to be able to get my interview with the mayor, or I need to get my interview with...with Dan Gilbert or the Ilitches, whoever." And so, you don't want to do anything that's gonna upset them. And, my attitude was always screw that, you know, is that if you got the goods, then either they respond or they don't respond, but if they don't respond, they're just gonna look bad. I didn't worry about access, you know. If Kwame Kilpatrick would not, you know, agree to let me interview him, I was never bothered by that. Matter of fact, it made me know that I was doing my job the way I should be doing it, if they don't want to do that. I thought it was more important to really investigate powerful people rather than try to curry favor with them. And, that was always, I think, our attitude.

[1:59:36]

**PB:** So, coming out of the...

**CG:** Oh, and--so, I didn't answer your question. And so, that... And so, that made us want to have, you know, in, like, talking to people who are the housing advocates--the other thing is it's like people in power, they're not gonna give you stories, right? They're not gonna give you stories that make them look bad. They're only gonna be giving you stuff that makes them look good and where you

find out what's really going on is not at the top, you know. I know Bob Woodward, you know, had said at one point--you know, he was a janitor before he became a journalist. And after he became a journalist, he knew that, like, he didn't leave anything in the garbage can because the janitors knew everything that was going on because they're going through all people's stuff, right? So, he'd lock his office or whatever.

But, it...that's where you get the information from is the people who are the lower, lower levels on the organizational charts. They're the ones that'll tell you what's really going on, and that's where your stories come from. It ends up being almost like a snowball effect. I mean, once you start doing that kind of work--I remember, like, every big story that I would do, I could pretty much guarantee that afterward I was gonna get at least a couple good tips and not even along the same lines, but people would call and say, "Jeez, if you've the guts to take them on, then I got something else because I don't think anyone else will do it." Right?

I mean, going after the Ilitches. We just saw HBO--why does it take HBO to really drop the hammer on what's going on with the development around the new hockey arena? When you look at the...the...the advertising power that the Ilitches have between the Red Wings and the baseball team--the Tigers--and, you know, Fox Theater and the casino that they own and all the advertising through that, you know, they can put a scare into people and, you know, and do you really want to get on their wrong side? And, I think--I don't want to seem unfair or overly harsh of, you know, mainstream reporters because they can do really good and important work, but that dynamic is there unless--especially when you're starting being owned by a hedge fund when alls they care about is the bottom line, you know, that, just the threat of that, has to, like, enter into people's minds, you know. It's like what's it gonna do for my career if I start going after these most powerful people?

I always saw it as our job in the alternative press. That's exactly who we should be going after and focusing on. Same way it was with Matty Moroun and the stuff that he was doing with the bridge that he owned [Ambassador Bridge]. I focused in on that because...because I didn't see other people really doing it to the extent that it deserved. And, writing about the stadium deals and how bad they were. And, it's not just here. It's proved how bad investments they are for municipalities

to be giving money to people who are billionaires. But, it really reached its apex under bankruptcy when--I tell people this: in what universe does it make sense for a city that is literally going through the bankruptcy process to give 250 million dollars to people who are billionaires to build a hockey arena and have some of that money be money that should be going to schools? It's insane to me. It is absolutely insane. First of all, if you're a billionaire, build your own stinking arena. Don't count on taxpayers to do it. You've got the money to do. Do it. Borrow it, do it. But, no. You get 240 to 250 million dollars, maybe it's even more, from a city that is literally declaring bankruptcy.

[1:04:26]

**PB:** So, let's bridge that gap between--just in terms of chronologically--between the Great Recession--you laid out for us that struggle around P.A. [Public Act] 4 and 436. So, I guess, can you bridge that gap between 436 and the consent decree, emergency management, and bankruptcy?

**CG:** Yeah. So, the consent decree was almost designed to fail. Again, I can't prove this. It's only speculation, but I think that the intent all along was to take Detroit into bankruptcy and to prove, you know, Jones Day's legal theory that you could go after retirees in bankruptcy and that that was the intent. The structural issues that we talked about, the taking away of revenue sharing, all was pushing things in that direction. But the--and the other aspect of it was the Water Department, and, you know, I wasn't here then, but I've heard many times people talk about Mayor Coleman Young warning the people of Detroit that the Water Department was immense value and that it was almost inevitable that there were gonna be attempts to take that away. And, that's what happened in bankruptcy, control of the Water Department got wrested away from the city. The city really didn't have a choice. They had to give up control to the Great Lakes Water Authority.

And, this is another thing that...that really gets me is that you have this system, this whole regional water and sewer system that is serving four million people. I'm not even sure that you can calculate how much that is really, really worth. 10 billion dollars? I don't know. I've never seen--it's hard to calculate because what do you compare it to? But in any event, as a result of what was forced on the city

in the bankruptcy, for the Great Lakes Water Authority to be leasing this whole vast system except for the part that is within the City of Detroit in terms of the infrastructure, the city for 40 years gets the lease payment is 50 million dollars. But, 13 million of that comes from the city itself, so the net is really only 37 million a year for 40 years. First of all, it's a pittance to begin with, but it's like being able to live in the nicest mansion in anywhere, in Palmer Woods for 300 bucks a month, right? It's like the value is unbelievable, but that... So, it's a pittance to begin with, and that's now. What's it gonna be 20, 30 years from now? It's still only gonna be 37 million dollars. That's gonna buy nothing, taking inflation into account. It's gonna be...the consequences of that... I just feel like the city has not really yet felt the full impact of how bad--not just bad, how horrible--that deal is gonna be.

Because the problem with the city--and this gets back to everything we were talking about before with the depopulation and the reason it's a structural problem--is that you had a city that was built to accommodate 1.8 million people. Now it's 670,000 people. When it was 1.8 million, it was the strongest middle-class anywhere in the world because of the unionization and African Americans were still disproportionately treated, but they were still doing much better than people of color in other parts of the country. And so, you had a very strong tax base in terms of people's income, the homes they could afford, the quality of the homes that they were building. Then, you go from that to 700,000 people, 40 percent of whom live below the poverty line, but yet you still have the same amount of water mains and sewer lines that have to be maintained, repaired, replaced, still have the same amount of roads that need paving. You still have the same amount of area that firefighters and police have to cover. So, even though there's only one house on a block where there used to be 40, if that house catches on fire, it still needs firefighters to come there and put it out.

And so, the costs are baked in, but the ability to meet those costs becomes more and more out of reach as the population declines, and then you ask more and more from those people who remain, which is why we're having the water shutoffs. Those water mains still have to be maintained, and the only place that money's coming from is from the rate payers. And so, you keep increasing, increasing, increasing the rates, and when people are on limited fixed incomes, at a certain point they just cannot afford it anymore. Or, it's like, okay, do I pay my rent, do I get my medication, or do I pay my water bill? That's the kind of choices

people are being forced to make as these infrastructure-related costs continue to escalate, and the Great Lakes Water Authority deal is only going to exacerbate that situation going forward.

[1:11:34]

**PB:** So, could you talk a little bit about how... Like, just explain to us how the DWSD [Detroit Water and Sewerage Department] got brought into the bankruptcy hearings?

**CG:** Yeah. It's what the governor wanted because the...the...the... None of the Detroit water bonds were touched at all in the bankruptcy. They were completely, completely untouched, even though much of the Water Department's debt was related to these interest rates swap deals that they had entered into. And, too complicated I think to go into, but essentially they were encouraged to, like, hedge their bets against interest rate increases. And then, when things crashed and interest rates dropped down to zero, they had to, like, make up the difference between what interest rates were really at and what they had sort of agreed to stick to. And so, it cost hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars in increased costs. And then, when they went to buy their way out of it was another, like 500 million dollars. So, in total, like, these interest rates swaps added a hundred--let me make sure I get this straight how much it was--oh, so these interest rates swaps cost Detroit Water Department over a billion dollars. At one point, the debt service was the single greatest Water Department expense. It was not maintaining all this infrastructure, it was just servicing the debt. But, that was... None of that was really touched in bankruptcy.

So, honestly, I can't give you a good answer as to why it was that control of the Water Department was taken away from the city in bankruptcy except that they had the power to do it, and that's what they wanted was to get control of that away from the city, which is the most valuable asset imaginable, and it's only going to become more and more valuable as climate change effects continue to be felt and you have more and more drought in other parts of the country. Here you are, Detroit, in the heart of the world's largest supply of fresh surface water, right? 20 percent of the world's fresh surface water is in the Great Lakes, and you have

the...one of the largest in North America water processing operations? You know, the value of that is incalculable, especially going forward. In terms of fostering new industries that are reliant on water, they're going to be coming here at some point in significant ways, and they took away Detroit's ability to capitalize on that and moved it to an entity that Detroit's part of but doesn't control.

[1:15:37]

**PB:** So, can you talk a little bit about--I want to get into the water shutoffs. So, can you connect or explain how...explain the increase in the water shutoffs in the way of emergency management and the regionalization of the water department?

**CG:** Well, in order for the... To get the deal to go through in terms of creating the Great Lakes Water Authority, they had to make the bottom line of the Detroit Water and Sewage Department look as good as possible and the way...one significant way of doing that was to go after people by shutting off their water. So, that was...that was, you know, ramped up directly under emergency management, and they started shutting off water to tens of thousands of homes. I mean, that's homes, so that's, in terms of--jeez, I think in the first year they might have done 30,000 homes.

You know, if you think three people per home, that's 90,000 people that had their water taken away from them, which just makes life almost unlivable. You can't live, literally cannot live, without water. But, what you have to do, you know, having a kind-hearted neighbor that'll run a hose over to your house or, you know, going without bathing, not having the ability to cook rice, things like that. It just created unbelievable hardship. And then, if you don't pay your water bill, then it gets attached to your taxes, and you can lose your home for not paying your water bill. And, just the stigma, you know. They come down the street, and they blue line. It's almost like they write on people's doors to indicate certain things. It's, boy, you're blue lined, you know. You're marked. Like, literally marked.

So, it was all part of the deal to improve the bottom line because there are people... You can't live without water, so you get it shut off, you're gonna come up



with that money whatever it takes. But yet, they are paying millions of dollars to outside contractors to be shutting off people's water, you know. Again, you can't afford to help out the people, but you can certainly put money into the pockets of private contractors. It's good business for them. Very, very good business for them going out and shutting off people's water. But... And so, it was either pay up or get out in terms of the customers. And, the assistance programs were completely, totally, totally inadequate, horribly inadequate. There was not nearly enough money available to help people losing their homes.

Or, they put them on payment plans. Well, so then what do you do? Well, okay, you take--you weren't able to afford you bill before. We're not gonna shut off your water, but we're gonna put you on a payment plan, which means, okay, keep paying as much as you were supposed to be paying before, plus in increments making up what you still owe us. Well, if I couldn't afford it before, how am I gonna afford even more now? So, it was, in large part, doomed to failure.

But--and they absolutely refused to try to implement rate structures based on affordability, which is what the advocates had been trying to get put in place since 2005. You know, poor--water is something that people need to live, and so you need to make it affordable, which means that base rates on people's ability to pay. That's the only fair, moral thing to do. But the city says, "No. The law won't allow us to do that." So instead of actually, like, going to court and testing that and fighting against it, or trying to get it changed in the legislature, it's like, "No, no. We're not interested in that. We're gonna do these assistance programs and help some people, but not everybody." But, they were just adamant in their refusal to put in place an affordability program, which other people have done. Philadelphia [Pennsylvania] is probably the best example of it being done. It can be done, and it helps make people's lives infinitely better. But, they didn't. They're still refusing to do it.

[1:21:16]

**PB:** Can you talk a little bit about any of the reporting that you did, like, on the ground and in the neighborhoods and community, whether that was, like, reporting on Homrich or talking to people who were impacted by the shutoffs?

**CG:** Yeah, and that was... By that point, I was working for the ACLU just going around knocking on doors, covering when activists were blocking trucks from leaving the Homrich site, covering the trials of those activists who were demanding jury trials in order to be able to publicly make their case about the injustice that they were fighting against. I worked with filmmaker Kate Levy doing some things, which was a great experience working with her. But, you know, some things... I remember sitting in the office of one of the activists when they were calling one of the places where people could supposedly turn to for financial help and, "Oh, sorry. We don't have any more money." And so, we were just showing--I think we called it...did a video called "Drop in the Bucket" where we just showed how inadequate these assistance programs were and how many people were suffering as a result of it. Kate got some really heart-rending shots of elderly people trying to carry buckets of water. Just heartbreaking, heartbreaking stuff.

[1:23:12]

**PB:** Is there, like, a particular story from a person whose door you knocked on that stands out, just in terms of illustrating what that looks like?

**CG:** Well, I do know, like, when I was going around knocking on doors, consistently it was people, a lot of people like on disability, right? They're getting their SSI [Supplemental Security Income] checks, seven hundred bucks a month or whatever it is. I mean, they're just living on the margins as it is. And, you know, they were not people... I remember some local TV person talking about, "Oh, yeah. Well, it's these people who aren't paying their water bills, but yet they still have cable." Right? No. No. Again, it's people who are trying to decide do I pay my rent, buy my medications, or pay my water bill? It was not any one story, but the consistency of stories and how many people were either physical disabilities or mental disabilities, but people that were just struggling to survive. And then, they have this added thing put on them. Getting your water shut off makes surviving even harder. Where do I come up with the money to get it turned back on? Just people who already have unbelievably hard lives being made even more difficult.

[1:24:55]

**PB:** We don't necessarily have time to get into Flint [Michigan]. I wish we did because you played a big role in reporting and breaking all the stories. But could you kind of just give us a rundown of what the connection is between the crisis in Flint and the water shutoff crisis here?

**CG:** Yeah. Well, so the same demographic issues, the same racial issues facing Detroit are in Flint. Flint's almost like a microcosm of Detroit. It went from a population of 200,000 to now it's fewer than 100,000. So, all those structural problems that were there in Detroit were also there in Flint. And, you know, it's...there's a reason why seven of the eight cities that were taken over under emergency management were majority-minority cities. [laughs] The racism that led to the structural problems was consistent, so it's not surprising that they were the ones that got taken over. People would often ask me, "Oh, do you think what happened in Flint would happen in Grosse Pointe [Michigan] or Bloomfield Hills [Michigan]?" I said, "Well, I can tell you with certainty that the answer is no because, first of all, those places don't get taken over by the state. Those places are rich enough that their democracy doesn't get taken away from them."

You know, another thing, getting back to the racist aspect of it, at one point there was an internal EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] memo that was surfaced that someone at the EPA wrote, "Is Flint really the kind of city we want to go out on a limb for?" Which is largely African-American, but also, again, race and class because not all the poor people living in Flint are African-American. There's a lot of poor white people living there, too. So, they weren't just majority-minority cities, they were also all cities with high poverty rates. So, again, race and class. A lot of it goes hand in hand, and those are the populations that suffer the most.

And so, all those things came into play in Flint. But, Flint also speaks to the...the...the...certainly speaks to the flaw that it was a managerial rather than structural problem. On its way out the door, the last emergency manager in Flint [Jerry Ambrose] wrote a letter to the governor saying, "Well, the books are balanced, but unless new income sources are found, Flint is not going to be a city where people are going to want to live, work, play." Flint's problems were not

solved in any way under emergency management and--but, it also speaks to the...the flaw in austerity economics. The rationale for switching to the Flint River as the city's water source while a new pipeline was being built was that the city would save five million dollars instead of using the clean, safe water being provided by the Detroit system. You know, they'd use the river for two years, they'd save five million bucks, right? That five million dollars is going to be a rounding error by the time the...the...the consequences of using that river water, the lead poisoning of the city's water supply, the Legionnaires' [disease] deaths that were associated with it.

The ACLU and the Natural Resources Defense Council brought a lawsuit trying to guarantee that the state would pay for the replacement for all the lead service lines in the city. Settlement for that was almost 100 million dollars. So right there, 20 times that five million dollars. The state has spent 30 million dollars both prosecuting people alleged to have committed crimes, but also defending those same people using taxpayer dollars, also defending--paying for lawyers to defend those people named in class action civil suits. So, 30 million dollars. So right there, six times. They're seeking hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars in these class action lawsuits. All the expenses, all the bottled water expenses, everything else that's gone on. You know, I wouldn't be surprised if some day you total up, it might be a billion dollars. For five million dollars.

Like I said, that's a rounding error, and that is...that's the problem with austerity economics. Governor Snyder came into office saying that he wants to run government like a business. Well, Flint shows what happens when you do that. You know, it's like the New Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, right? You cut corners in order to maximize profits, and what do you do? You pollute the whole Gulf of Mexico and decimate fishing industries. What you saved nowhere near the amount of monetary damages that kind of thinking costs. Well, you can see, okay, capitalism, okay, you're all about maximizing the bottom line. So, you're willing to take those risks because you're not the one bearing the brunt. But, government is not a business. You're not there--the bottom line is not your focus. Your focus as the government is to protect the health and well-being of the people you are there to serve. So, we saw in Flint what happens when you run government like business. You cut corners just like businesses cut corners, and then you create catastrophes because of that cost cutting.

[1:31:40]

**PB:** We're just about out of time, but I want to ask another question, kind of speaking more generally-- or you could provide some examples too--but what's the role that journalists can and should be playing within social movements?

**CG:** Yeah, it's... You know, I think it's tricky, right? Because it gets back to what we were talking about earlier, you know, whatever your...no matter how good your intentions are, you don't want to be a propagandist because you lose your credibility when you do that. But, so... So, again, it gets back to, like, my philosophy, you know, your political leanings or whatever can lead you towards the kind of stories that you want to cover, but then once you start to do it, you have to let the card fall where the cards fall.

Like, when we were doing Flint, at a certain point it was like I uncovered this...had this memo provided to me from the EPA saying, "Lead's a problem." It had Brad Wurfel of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality saying, you know, "We've been testing water all around Flint, and we can tell people when it comes to lead they can just relax. It's not a problem." How do you get beyond that he said/she said aspect of it? Well, I started talking to my bosses, "Well, you know, I've been talking to Marc Edwards at Virginia Tech [Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University], and, you know, maybe we could help fund doing our own tests." And, I said--it ended up we didn't fund it. He got a grant from the National Science Foundation, which ended up being even better, but when we were talking about doing it, what I said was, "Look, it... I think we're gonna find that what the EPA memo says is true, that the lead levels are a lot higher than what the city and state are saying. But, let's say we go ahead and do it, and we find out that it really is what the city and state say it is. Then, we hold a press conference and we say that because people right now don't trust it. So, what we can do is, because we're independent, because we don't have a dog in this fight, we can say, 'Look, it... We tested the water ourselves, and what they're saying is true.'" That would've given people an assurance.

So, there would have been value to it whether we had this big blockbuster story or it was not a big blockbuster story, but it was important to get that information. And, that sort of, like, gets to the heart of it. Whatever it is, like, exposing the truth of something is important, especially when people are trying to hide the truth. You know, the more they try to hide it, the more determined you become to uncover it. And, that's what the value is. So, your heart can, you know, lead you to want to do certain stories, but the real value is the...uncovering the truth. That's what journalism is all about. So whether you consider yourself an advocate journalist or not, the...your goal, whatever it is, is to be telling the truth about what's going on.

**PB:** In...

**CG:** And, I can--and that's like fundamental to democracy. When the ACLU was applying for a grant with the Ford Foundation to hire me, one of the things they were saying is that, you know, mainstream journalism is cutting back on investigative reporting because of what's going on financially in the industry, and investigative reporting is the most expensive kind of reporting because, you know, there's a reason you call it investigative. You don't know for sure when you get into something whether it's...there's gonna be something there or not. You spend a month, six weeks and come up with a dry hole, right? Well, that's... The whole time is, you know, you're not cranking out tweets or whatever. You're not coming up with anything that's gonna be in the paper or on the evening news, but that's part of the way it is, right? That's why they call it investigative journalism. Sometimes you make that investment and it doesn't pay off, but that's just the way it works. But because that's happening less and less, because when, you know, a paper, broadcaster is looking at the bottom line, it's like we have to cut. Well, let's cut this person that's only producing something every six weeks or so and have people cranking out multiple things on a daily basis. That's...

So, that, you know, back to the time of the founding fathers, the system of government with checks and balances between the various branches was set up, but then as fourth check on those other three branches of government was an independent media to help hold people accountable. It is an essential part of a functioning democracy and without it--like, Judge [Damon J.] Keith, right? "Democracy dies behind closed doors." Well, it's part of the role of journalism to

break down those closed doors and to shine light where those in power don't want light to be shone. So, it is crucial to the functioning of democracy that people are doing it, whether it be mainstream media or increasingly non-profit journalism. But, again, the bottom line, if you call yourself a journalist, then you better be telling the truth, and not the whole truth, right? If there's parts of it that go against what you're advocating for, you have to include it. You have to lay it all out.

[1:38:06]

**PB:** And, just lastly, real, very briefly because it's 2 o'clock right now.

**CG:** Okay.

**PB:** What's your vision for what an equitable society could look like for Detroit?

**CG:** Inequitable?

**PB:** Sorry, not inequitable, but what's an equitable society look like in the future of Detroit?

**CG:** Gosh. Because I...I see it being the opposite. I see Detroit as possibly being the clearest example of oligarchy coming to America. I mean, you have a...one person owning 90 buildings in downtown. You have, you know, with what the Ilitches have with their little empire here. You have Hantz Farms over on the East Side where someone vastly wealthy for 500,000 dollars given a huge swath of property in a major city. I mean, what's 500,000 dollars? Doesn't even get you like a little apartment in New York City [New York], right? But yet, you get all this land for 500,000 dollars that you're just essentially land banking until you can really capitalize on it? I just see the very, very wealthy in Detroit controlling things and then using that control to continue to benefit themselves through getting more and more tax breaks.

And especially in Detroit, because...especially in Detroit because of the tax finance district that is set up for downtown, which was expanded to include the hockey arena, but that the wealth that is created and the tax increases that are created as a result of that stay downtown. It's not going out to the neighborhoods. So, it's hard for me to even envision. I just see, like, gosh, you gotta try to curtail the power of the oligarchs at this point because that's where we're at. So, what does an equitable Detroit look like? I have a hard time imagining it. I don't spend time imagining it. What I think about is how do you try to rein in the inequity that is running absolutely rampant at this point?

**PB:** Thank you.

[1:41:05]

[Post-interview conversation]

**CG:** Yeah. Yeah. I hope it was worthwhile.

**PB:** It was. I hope it was for you as well and in some way, shape, or form.

**CG:** No, I'm proud to be associated with anything connected to the [Damon J.] Keith Center [for Civil Rights] here.

**PB:** Well, we appreciate your time and sharing.

**CG:** Yeah.

[End]