

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

Aurora Harris

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER

April 26, 2019

Detroit, Michigan

Narrator

Aurora Harris grew up in Detroit and the Philippines. She started writing poetry at the age of seven and became an activist in her teenage years. She holds a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Sociology from Wayne State University and a Master of Arts Degree in Social Foundations in Education from Eastern Michigan University. She is a poet, an activist on education and water issues, the Director of Education for We the People of Detroit, and a professor of African American history, literature, and creative writing at University of Michigan-Dearborn.

Outside Source: We the People website, wethepeopleofdetroit.com/our-people

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

Aurora Harris discusses her family background, what the city was like during her childhood, the discrimination she faced as a mixed-race child, her memories of the 1967 Detroit rebellion, and how the city has changed over the years. Throughout the interview, she stresses how the depopulation and gentrification of Detroit have been driven by the purposeful destruction of city services, union busting, food deserts, water shutoffs, and the foreclosure crisis. Major topics include how We the People of Detroit started and what their goals are, her work as a special education advocate, and how 'security' measures in schools led to the criminalization of parents. She talks at length about the Detroit Freedom Schools movement and its mission, her involvement in the Freedom Schools, and how the Right to Literacy court case has shown that the community must be willing to do its own education. She discusses personal anecdotes of what gentrification has looked like in her neighborhood and how the history of the city is disappearing. She talks about her own poetry and the importance of poetry and the arts in imagining a better future and her work as the Director of Education for We the People including their new water affordability curriculum. She also gives advice for activists, talks about the importance of self-care, shares her vision for the future of Detroit, and shares a memory of Lila Cabbil.

Keywords

1967 Detroit rebellion; Arts; Detroit bankruptcy; Detroit Public Schools; Detroit, Michigan; Education; Emergency management; Food deserts; Foreclosure crisis; Freedom Schools; Gentrification; Journalism; Labor unions; Poetry; Police brutality; Policing; Privatization; Special education; Water affordability; Water shutoffs; We the People of Detroit

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Transcript of interview conducted April 26, 2019 with:

Aurora Harris [AH]

Detroit, MI

By: Peter Blackmer [PB]

AH: Hi. I'm Aurora Harris, and I live in Detroit [Michigan]. I was born in Detroit. I live in the neighborhood between Boston-Edison Historical District and Highland Park [Michigan], which is another smaller city right outside of Detroit, and I've been involved in activism since 1968. I started when I was a child. My parents were activists. My mother came from the Philippines. She was a prisoner of war. My father's side of the family, great-grandparents and grandmother were one of the...were some of the first African-American converts to Islam that eventually started the Nation of Islam here. So, I grew up working with the community and understanding the levels of racism that we were experiencing here in this country when I was a child, from both African-American and Asian perspectives.

[0:01:10]

PB: So, along those lines, can you describe what your neighborhood was like growing up?

AH: We moved into our neighborhood in 1962, and it was mostly a mixed-race neighborhood of immigrants and people who had survived either World War II or who had come out of the Holocaust or the Armenian genocide. So, my neighborhood. I guess on my street, we were maybe the third or fourth African American or mixed-race family to move in. On the right side of my house, we had

Jewish neighbors. The father had survived Auschwitz. On the right side of my house, we had a German woman who had left Germany to get away from World War II. Down the street, we had Armenian survivors and generally just general persons of European descent that were just sprinkled through the neighborhood. We had Chaldeans that lived down the street, and there weren't that many African Americans that moved in at that time. The banks wouldn't give African Americans loans to get banks. So, we were...we were, you know, I guess, fortunate to get a house, but the way that we got our house was not because my father was Black, it was because my mother and my grandfather were white-skinned Filipinos.

[0:02:35]

PB: So, can you talk a little bit about how the city has changed since then?

AH: Well, the city has changed a lot. I mean, we went through the rebellion, the [19]67 Rebellion, and, you know, there was a lot of devastation here. I wasn't here at the time. I was a child, but I was in the Philippines watching the rebellion via satellite while President [Ferdinand] Marcos was in the midst of deciding to put the Philippines under martial law. So, by the time the Rebellion started here and we received the telegram to come home, we were leaving a situation in the Philippines under the initial movements of repression to come here to deal with the aftereffects of oppression, and we had the white flight out. So, when I was...by the time I was eight or nine, most of my neighbors had moved away, most of the buildings were being bought now by African Americans and other immigrants.

But, this devastation, I mean, in the past, you know, from [19]67 to last year, you know, or the year before, 40 years, it's changed a lot. It's changed a lot in the sense of... I can just recall in the past 20 years the devastation that came about due to the fabricated bankruptcy, and what I say about the fabricated bankruptcy is what I mean. It was fabricated. If... From the ground looking...looking back, when you talk about, you know, Detroit was losing money, we weren't losing money. They were just covering it up. What they did do prior to the bankruptcy was insure that this place would look like it was a war-torn area and keeping people in the dark literally.

So, I know for at least 15 years most of the neighborhoods in Detroit did not have streetlights. My neighborhood just got streetlights maybe three or four years ago when they started putting the streetlights in. So, I would say from, I don't know, from the late [19]90s up until three years ago, that's how long my neighborhood didn't have lights on the main streets. There're areas west of me where my cousins lived, closer to 12th and 14th Street, between the Boulevard [East Grand Boulevard] and I-94 that was completely blacked out. And then, they started shutting off the lights on the freeways, which made it a dangerous condition as well. So, I mean for driving and, you know, with all of the trucking and stuff that goes on, transporting goods back and forth. So, you had more accidents. You had people crashing into each other, and we were trying to figure out when are they gonna put the freeway lights back on.

So now, at night, if you were to go maybe seven, eight, nine years ago and you took a...an overhead look from above on the city, there were pockets, large pockets, of Blackness, and the only place that was really lit up was downtown. And on Woodward Street, the lights would be on all the way from Jefferson downtown up to about Philadelphia Street. And then, once you got past Philadelphia, which is a little bit north I think of the [Grand] Boulevard, then the streetlights would go out. And then, they would pick up again. I think the pattern is still the same. If you ride Woodward at night, you'll see it. You'll see where they're lighting up areas where wealthy people live, or gentrifiers live. And then, the areas where the existing population has been it's blacked out, and then it'll pick up again where they're moving in.

In terms of the...the changes that happened to the city, when they did the pensions, when they took the pensions and people had to fight for the city pensions, we had the domino effect of destruction is what I call it. Because they took the pensions away, which helped devastate the senior citizens' ability to pay, you know, keep paying on their homes if they had their...if they owned their homes, because at that time, you know, you've got life-long workers. They don't own a mortgage, right? Unless you're renting someplace. And...and then, they hit us with the...the closure of the schools and that emptied out the neighborhoods. And then, the water shut offs. And then, the main foreclosures. And, I think that's it. So, it's like four things back to back to back.

So, 10 years ago, I was just starting to work with Detroit Public Schools as a parent advocate because my great-nephew has a disability. He has autism, and I had been caretaking my parents, elder care parents. So, there were these women who called me and said, "We need new people to participate at the county level." And I said, "Okay. Well, my parents have passed away now, and I have a little bit more time." So, I get involved. Well, my involvement was protesting every day at the City-County Building on the takeover of the schools by the mayor. So, when I was there to actually meet other parents of children with disabilities to have a talk and try to figure out what we were going to do when they started closing the schools down with all the children with special needs in it, that's when I met Debra [Taylor] and Monica [Lewis-Patrick] and Cicely [McClellan] and other folks--even though we had loosely worked around each other and worked with each other years ago--we just formed and said, "We're going to fight this." And that's how We the People came about and formed right in the hallway of the City-County Building on the thirteenth floor.

[0:09:26]

But to wake up and see the devastation every day, you know--and I'm not ashamed to say that I was, you know, a victim of the foreclosure thing too in the sense that one day I woke up, and there was a yellow bag on my door with the rest of my neighbors, and it wasn't, you know, by any fault of mine, but my parents had passed away, and I didn't know that there was tax owed on the house. So, it took me seven years basically--or six years--for me to keep paying to get out of the foreclosure, to get the back taxes caught up so I wouldn't get my house taken away from me. So, you know, [sighs] there's so much stuff that's been layered.

So, the water. After the schools, I decided to start taking complaints for...on behalf of the children and the parents with special needs children. So, with 30--almost 30 years of experience in special education just as a parent or a caregiver, I had to teach myself the laws. And then, I started going out and teaching other parents the laws and how to become advocates for their own children. So, that's one situation. And then, working with students who are of color and immigrant

children, trying to keep them out of special ed classes because they're general ed students, but they're not first language, you know, English speakers. So because they're speaking second--their home languages, they were being labelled special ed and put into those courses too, classes too. So, you know, working in various populations, trying to get those children out of special ed, trying to save the children that were in special ed, and then trying to figure out where we were gonna house them or move them once the schools shut down. So, that's one front.

And then, they started shutting off the water, and we just decided that something has to be done. So, We the People was the first group to start the emergency water hotline so that people could call in and if they didn't have water, they can call in and order water, and we started telling people we're gonna set up water stations. So, we were the first ones to start up the water stations here so that people could come and pick up water. And then, we started organizing to get volunteers to deliver the water. I think our first shipments of water came from Canada. Semi-truck loads came to the church at St. Peter's [Episcopal Church] to unload the water, and then we started picking up momentum. The more each one of us--because there's five of us--went out and spoke in different areas, that's how we started getting more people involved and getting more donations of water to...to our water stations. And then, it was working. Like, I worked the water hotline, so to hear the phone calls firsthand of people who have had their water shut off... We're talking families, elderly people.

Right now, it's been, I don't know, five, six years, and we still get people who don't have water, who have not had water for three or four years. I get calls from veterans who somehow got their benefits lost or mixed up or something. Elderly people whose husbands, women whose husbands died, and they didn't know how to pay the bills. They thought the husband paid the bills, and they didn't. Anything from that to the water company came out, there was a slight leak, and the water company busted up the floors and the pipes and didn't replace them so the basement's flooded. Anything from five or six houses running for years with water running and your bill is 100 dollars, and all of a sudden, you get a bill for 4,000 dollars and you don't know where it's coming from. From that... And then, they tell you it's your water bill.

So, you know, we've had to work with attorneys, we've had to take testimony, we've had to try to, you know, figure out where this breakdown is in this water deprivation and shut off situation, which is really a crisis. I look at it and so does Monica and Debra and Cicely and Chris [Phyllis Griffith], we see it as an act of war. Because when you go into places when you declare war, you shut off the water, you shut off the food sources, you shut off the electricity. The things that are happening here is just like being in a war-torn area or a zone...

[0:14:55]

[Phone rings, video stops]

AH: The result [phone rings] of what's been happening is that it is made to look like a war-torn zone. Can we stop for a minute? I'm sorry.

PB: That's okay.

AH: It's probably my nephew. [phone continues to ring] I want to make sure that the other phone is off too [laughs]. Sorry about that.

PB: No worries.

AH: Okay, y'all let me know if I'm rambling or talking in circles.

PB: Oh, no. It's fine. I don't want to interrupt you while you're doing it. We can... I'll just come back to some of this, and I'll mix it in if that's alright.

AH: Okay. I hope I didn't drop that phone in that other Uber. That's my nephew's phone. Oh. [sighs] I think I shut it off, but I don't know. I may find it later. I don't know what happened to it. I can't put my hands on it. I think I shut it off. Okay.

Sorry. I forgot all about the thing being attached, [laughs] and I just got off and started walking!

Herbert Taylor [HT]: If you have a pocket you can put it in there or...

AH: I don't have any pockets on here. Maybe...

HT: I just want you to be comfortable, you know. I don't want you to...

AH: Okay, I'll just put it on my back pocket? There's a back pocket back here. You know how they do it with these women's fashions. They give us clothes with fake pockets on the front of them. Like we don't have anything to do, to put [laughs]. No place to put stuff. Oh well, that's not gonna fit.

PB: Yeah, you can just set it down -

AH: I'll just set it, okay. So.

HT: One second.

AH: I can't remember where I was. I was just rambling.

PB: Where we were -

AH: Oh, about war.

PB: You said it was an act of war.

AH: Okay.

PB: Because the first thing that they do when they go in is shut off the water.

[Video resumes]

[0:14:56]

AH: ...you know, when they shut off the water, we were in the midst of being a food desert where, you know, most of the grocery store chains had pulled out. They didn't want to do business in Detroit. So, the majority of the population couldn't even get fresh, healthy food either, and then they shut off the water. So, I mean, you have to have the whole picture and connect the dots and not believe the garbage that's being broadcast around the world about what's going on here. It's not that the people are lazy, it's not that the people don't care, it's not any of that crap that they've been saying in, you know, world news or local news or international news, and people need to understand we have a news blackout here. We've had a news blackout here for a while that prevents the actual truth of what is going on here from getting out. If it wasn't for independent news broadcasters or independent television, independent filmmakers, independent radio, and people like that that come in to get the stories like what we're doing now, there would not be, I don't think, a real story, you know. Or, the real truth, because the story that's out there is a story. What we're telling you is ground truth. Ground-level truth stuff that we're living and breathing, you know. We're sharing our lived experiences of what's going on here.

So, when they shut off the water and we're in the middle of a food desert, and then they pulled...they fabricated that bankruptcy, and then they put the emergency managers in. The first thing the emergency managers did was start closing down the schools. The schools had security teams in them. The security teams were mostly parents and grannies and aunties and uncles and stuff like that from the neighborhood that would help walk the kids home, break up fights, you know, community-type people taking care of the kids and high schoolers and

whatever, you know. And then, they came in and released all those people, fired them. Then, they hired this...this police force security team called Securitas that came in from Sweden, and they paid them a little bit more of minimum wage. And so, now you've got a police force system from outside as part of the privatization. So, that was one of the first things that started privatizing in the schools. As that was going on, then we started getting the privatization of the trash pickup in the city. So, these early movements for, you know, privatization, taking things out of the people's hands, started when Robert Bobb came here.

And then, the second thing--one, two, three--the third thing that happened was that on the...the buses that transport the special needs children, they fired all of the help, all of the aides to help the special needs children. So, if you're in a wheelchair and you need to get on the school bus, there's an aide to help strap you in. There may be someone who can do sign language. There may be someone who could help, you know, a person who's blind and, you know, have problems with sight or something. And, they got rid of all those people. And then, we had to fight to get those...those...those people reinstated. So, the first real fight that I got involved with for those children happened the January 2010 or [20]11. There was a busload of us. We went in a caravan in the middle of a snowstorm to Lansing [Michigan], and we went to testify about the release of those workers off of those buses and how it was against American Disabilities Act laws. There were...there would be no protections on the buses for children. And then, they started mixing on the buses, putting the special needs children on the buses with general ed children. So now, there was an increase in fights and bullying of special needs children.

Then, one of the things I testified to, they put in a security swipe system in the schools where parents who would normally come in to pick up their children, you had... If you were an involved parent, you had like a badge that--a paper badge--something with a picture on it, you could go in. And then, they changed it to the security swipe system, and they said, "Well, this is to keep the pedophiles out," but really what it was was to criminalize the parents because there was such a setup of population removal in this city they were doing everything possible. So, I and other parents started the PTA [Parent-Teacher Association]. We started getting the PTAs back in. We had a special ed PTA, and we found that parents that swiped their cards, their IDs, license, driver's license into this thing were now being arrested on site because the police...they had the Securitas security force in

the system, in the schools and the Detroit Police in the schools. And with the security swipe system, what we discovered was that if you were just going to pick up your child and you swiped your driver's license and you owed some tickets, you could be arrested for the tickets, you could be arrested on back child support, you could be arrested for anything.

And then, you had, you know, people who were working with all of the emergency managers and the takeover people, and as people would kind of get arrested or got arrested, then you had the other people who would pick up the phone and say, "So-and-so's got arrested. Go to the house. The kids are alone." And then, the CPS [Child Protective Services] workers would be called, and the CPS would take the children. And so, here you have this cycle of criminalizing the parents and then taking the children right into the...the...the hands of the state. So, if you're a working class person or, you know, working poor and say this happens to you, hypothetically, and you can't get out of jail because you can't get to your job. Your boss fires you because you don't have any sick time or sick days to take. And then, you don't have that money to raise bail. Say, if your family's poor, you can't raise the bail. And then, your children are taken away, and you can't afford the lawyers to get your children out of the courtroom and the hands of the state with the CPS workers, so they become permanent residents of someone else's home.

So, part of that stuff that I was also dealing with that was part of that snowball effect too was meeting with the parents who had lost their children, and these parents were, prior to all of this stuff going on, but, you know, just based on fake CPS calls. But eventually, they...we started picking up more people from our end of the activism during this time because they got to meet the parents who had their children taken away by CPS workers and had gone bankrupt trying to fight the court system and get their children back. And by the time they turn 16 or 17 in the foster care, they change their names. So, they had lost their children. So, here we have a second wave of it in a different way now by criminalizing the parents.

And then, with the swipe system, we found that there was no...they couldn't tell us where they would store the information. They couldn't tell us who was keeping the information, but we did find out that every time you swiped, it was tied to the credit system across the world and the banking system. So every time you swiped into that system, it would send up a flag to the banks and your creditors and the

credit ratings people and whatever, and you would show up as a risk every time you swiped. And so, we started finding that parents were...were saying, you know, "We went to go get a loan for a car. We couldn't get a loan." Or, "We went to pay for tuition. We can't get a loan." Whatever it is, they couldn't get it. Apply for a credit card, couldn't get it.

Now, who would think every time you're walking into a school you're thinking, "Oh, okay. I'm playing into the system," and this is supposed to be for the safety of the children to keep the pedophiles out, and everyone should be checked. You wouldn't expect your driver's license to be run in North American, you know, and Canadian, all over the place security checks, and every time you swipe, it's affecting your credit rating. But, this is the type of grassroots stuff we had to find out. We didn't go get lawyers for this. We just started digging and trying to figure out what happened. Eventually, we talked to lawyers, and I'm glad that we have a good team of attorneys that are, you know, from the neighborhoods and the city, that are from the community that we trust. So, those are just a few things. And the fact that they weren't processing...they weren't processing the complaints about special needs education.

[0:25:06]

PB: So, who else was involved with you in this organizing on the schools?

AH: When I started, there was... First, it was We the People people 'cause we started with the stop of the mayor takeover of the schools. So, that initially would've been Monica Lewis-Patrick, Debra Taylor, Cicely McClellan, Chris, Christine Griffiths, and other people, myself, and just general people from the neighborhood. I can't recall their names right now because it's been so long, but on the special ed side it was Verna Brocks, Eileen Gordon-King, Aundra Bomar, and I can't think of the other parents right now, but we were... Verna Brocks was the first one to call me right after my mom passed to ask me to get involved. So, I don't know if I can remember later the other parents' names, and I... Please forgive me because I'm just...I just can't... There were quite a few of us that were involved.

[0:26:32]

PB: Did you have any relations with, like, Helen Moore and Elena Herrada and any of those people at this time?

AH: Yeah. Helen was on...was one of the people that came up to Lansing to help with the protests on the removal of the bus aides, but she was working in a different area. At one point when the community got involved and we decided to attend the emergency manager meetings, there was a summer where they said, "We're gonna pick people from the community, and you're gonna tell us how this district is going to run." And, this was at the beginning of the Skillman [Foundation] involvement with Excellent Schools [Detroit] and bringing in all the private charter schools. I can't remember what year it is--was--but that summer myself and Verna, Eileen, Dr. Gloria House, another activist by the name of Chris White, and Sandra Hines, we all met as part of, like, education committee to report and give ideas. Because you know how they do, they sweep in, let's get everybody together, let's have a big lunch, let's get your ideas, we're gonna improve it based on your ideas--it's a bunch of B.S. They took our ideas and didn't do anything.

And so, there was... Helen Moore was... I think her...her area was, like, security in the schools. She was on that team. So, it was like a security committee, a general education committee, there was a finance, I guess, committee or something like that. So, there were different groups of people that met every week at least once or twice a week for the entire summer. And on the committee that I was on, that Verna asked me to participate on, that's where I received...we received the first notebook of the entire district DPS [Detroit Public Schools] school system, every...how it was gonna...how it ran, every department, every, you know, curriculum that was made, how special ed administration, everything, how everything was going to be administrated, how the principals gonna work, all the policies and procedures. I mean, huge, huge notebook. And then, it was reduced down to, like, this little, and they said we're gonna call it Excellent Schools [Detroit].

So, one of the things that I started hollering about was where is the whole section on special education? They had reduced it to two or three sentences about the rights of special needs children covered under civil rights law, American Disabilities Act, and something else. Like, three sentences in the whole package for Excellent Schools. And I said, "There's nothing in here about how anything is gonna run, no hierarchy about who reports to whom, nothing on how the union is gonna operate, how...what the hiring practices are for teachers, none of that." All of it was erased--or hidden.

And, I keep telling people as I go out and do similar stories like this one, if I could just get through my house and get through all those boxes 'cause I kept everything. I kept everything from those early days, including the newspaper, like the *Michigan Citizen*. That was the activist newspaper, community newspaper that would come out and photograph us and interview us for all of our general actions and things. And then, from the closure of the schools and the continued closure of the schools, this is where we start working with Dr. [Gloria] House--now, I'm moving it up now, three years ago, four years ago. I was teaching at U of M [University of Michigan], still being an activist and advocate for the parents and stuff, and Dr. House says, you know, "They're starting these Freedom Schools." So, I volunteered to work in a Freedom School. So, I'm one of the coordinating committee members for the Freedom Schools now.

[0:31:20]

PB: Could you talk a little bit more about the Freedom Schools? Like, what the early days were like, what the structure is?

AH: Well, the early...the first... The early one was that to my knowledge there was a coordinating committee that was headed up by people like Dr. Gloria House, Shea Howell, Tom Stevens, Julia Cuneo, and other volunteers. They were coming from out of the--and I think Pastor Bill Wylie-Kellermann was part of it too. Because there was the group called DREM, right? Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management. So, it's kind of like the big group of all of the activist groups here that were involved on different fronts. So, there was a meeting where they decided they were gonna start the Freedom School, and the early school, the first

one, was at the Dexter-Elmhurst Center, and we ended up, you know, cleaning out the rooms over there.

All the volunteer teachers came, and we just said this is what we'll teach. So, we had teachers to teach science. Teachers that taught math. I taught English and writing for the middle school through twelfth grade kids. There was someone who worked with the preschool and early Pre-K kids. But, we did math, science, writing, that kind of thing. Social studies, cultural studies, history from an African-centered point of view. So, that's what, you know, we did. We ran that one summer, and then we moved to the Cass Commons on Fourth and Cass. The school that started there came out of We the People Youth because we have a youth program. So, now I've got different hats on. We the People and over here and over there. But, our We the People Youth decided they wanted to have their own Freedom School too. So, that was a student-run Freedom School at one point.

And then, we moved to the Charles Wright [Museum of African American History] on Saturday. And so, we're housed at the Charles Wright every Saturday, and then the Shrine of the Black Madonna joined at the Freedom School. The Puritan Church on the Northeast side near Conant [Street] had a Freedom School there. We had a Freedom School couple summers ago in Highland Park [Michigan] at another church. So, depending on who wants to get involved and how many children are there, that's how we operate. And, it's mostly volunteers. Most of us either have worked in education or have worked in counseling with youth, that type of thing.

[0:34:30]

PB: What do those class sessions look like in terms of the dynamics of the classroom?

AH: Like a regular classroom. Sometimes they're--depending on how...what room, if we're in a church and we're in a classroom classroom, there's a classroom look to it. But at the Charles Wright, they sit around tables, you know. Over there, we

also have drumming lessons. We have gardening lessons. The Charles Wright is the first museum to ever have a fresh food garden that was started by our kids. So, they get to garden, they get to, you know, harvest, and they get to process the food and eat it over there. So, it's a little bit, but it's still more like a classroom type thing too. But, there's a lot of participation by the children, and we have tutoring in math and science.

When we... We had Dr. James Brown and Semaj [Brown], his wife, who's a poet but she's also a scientist. They did the first science class at the Charles Wright which gave a lot of the children their first experience with microscopes. So, we had a lot of microscopes donated. We get books donated from all, people, neighborhoods, schools, whatever, colleges. But, that was really important because a lot of the children had not been in a science class with microscopes like they do in the suburbs, so we brought them and set it up there. They've had classes with Lottie Spady on how to use herbs and plants for medicines, that type of thing too, drumming classes with Kafentse Chike. I've taught poetry and history and writing.

[0:36:18]

PB: What would you... What is the broader mission of the Freedom Schools?

AH: Our mission is to educate our children. Period. Because the... So many of them were...were...were just had fallen through the cracks. When we started the Freedom School, I think there were 6,000 to 8,000 children, school children, who were on the streets. They didn't have any place to go. So, of course if you don't have any place to go and you're on the street, what's gonna happen next? The police are gonna pick you up. So, all of, you know, all this stuff has been orchestrated, you know. But, our mission is to teach our children, give them educa--help them with their tutoring with their core subjects and do it from an African-centered perspective. They need to know they history because they didn't get it in schools, and it's important for me to teach it too because I teach African and African-American history at the University of Michigan. So--and I teach advanced writing and advanced rhetoric. So what I teach my students, I bring into

the classroom for the middle schoolers through twelfth graders because I want them prepared, you know.

And, it's not education, formal education. It's also business education too. We've had people who've come in. We do workshops on how to become independent business people, how to set up your own business, how to take your own designs and make your own business because, see, that's one of the problems with education today. The children or the youth think we're so old fashioned. We never asked them, "Well, what is it that you really want to do?" Because they're always screaming, "All you want us to do is get education and go work for somebody else. Well, what if we want to work for ourselves?" Well, with the Freedom School, that's possible. We can sit there and say, "Okay, well, what's your idea? I've worked with jazz musicians, classical musicians, record companies, whatever, what do you want to do?" So, all of us--this is where artists come involved...become, you know, get involved. We're connected. And so, we give back to the children and the youth things that they wouldn't be able to actually get a hold of in a regular school because most of us are...we started out...out the back of our cars and trunks and our book bags selling our poems or records or CDs or whatever, tapes.

[0:38:58]

PB: So, what kind of impacts have you seen the Freedom School have, whether that's like with individual children or on a larger scale?

AH: Well, the...the impact is that they say that they can be around other children that are learning new things, okay? So, you know, for them to learn about plants and medicine, how plants can be medicinal, that was a big thing. To know that they can go out and plant a seed in a raised bed and learn what raised bed gardening is about and then watch it grow and then say, "Wow, we can harvest this, and now we can cook it, and it's healthy," because they're raising food without chemicals. So, that's an impact as well. They're learning how to eat healthier. They're learning that they can grow their own food and eat healthier.

You know, there's a lot of pride. The children are very happy to be involved with those type of, you know, programs. You know, and to see that they're around adults--the care...caring part of it is that they get to be around adults who really, we can say, "We love you," right? And they're like, "You don't know me." Well, that's okay, we still love you. They get to hear that, and they get to be around educators and people from the community who know so many other people who can teach them other new things. So, they get grounded in community. They get grounded in that sense of love from the community. They get grounded in the sense that they don't have to come to a classroom where they're being called stupid and dumb all, all, all day long. We generally ask the children, "Well, what do you know good today?" I usually tell them, you know, "What's your gift?" When they meet me, "What's your gift?" And they go, "What are you talking about?" And I say, "What's special about you? What do you know how to do that I don't know?" And I get them talking, and I tell them, "I'm not just here to teach. I'm also here to learn from you. You can be the teacher for a few minutes." So, that's an opportunity that they get as well.

[0:41:13]

PB: This is making me think about, like, back to what you mentioned about your family's roots in the Nation of Islam and knowing that Nation of Islam had independent schools, and Freedom Schools were a big part of the southern Civil Rights movement, and there are Freedom Schools in Detroit, too. So, like, how do you understand the connection between Freedom Schools that you all are operating now within that kind of historical...

AH: Well, it fits right into it because, I mean, if you want to look at it from a history perspective that's grounded in the experience of African-Americans, that's how schools started during and after the enslavement period. If anyone could read, you didn't have to go into a school. You'd go over to, you know, the aunt so-and-so's house is having some reading lessons over there, and so you go. So, you learn in the home. So, that could be related to the early homeschooling movement coming out of the enslaved, formerly enslaved people. Building your own schools, taking your own initiative to teach your...your own selves and your own histories. That's part of independence and self-determination, you know. So, I, you know, I haven't left that, and it's all tied together because if you're not

learning from...from the structural things, you know, formal structural types of things that are around you and they're not serving you, then the community, someone in the family, will start it and pick it up.

And, this is what I tell my students, and I've been saying this for a long, long time, even at the university. Your gift, one of your gifts, is that you can read and you can write. Let's start there. You can hold reading...reading lesson workshops in your backyard all summer and just sit there with children and teach them how to write cursive because they're taking cursive out of the schools. That's a dumbing down, you know, so you can only be operating on one side of your brain, you know. Get some books and have a reading circle. There's elderly people still around that don't know how to read. So, I mean, like start with the basics. You know how to read and write. Anybody can have a school. You don't have to, you know, you can start it anywhere. On the front porch.

[0:43:55]

PB: Which, I mean, becomes even more important and I guess radical at this moment, too, after the failings of the...the...the district court to rule in the right to literacy case. Right, like recognizing that the state doesn't hold that literacy is a constitutional right.

AH: Right. Well, you know, we've been saying that forever. They just...they've just, you know, made it formal, what we can hear it. But, I've been saying this forever and so have other people. That, you know, it depends on how it's interpreted, you know, with constitutional law, and it's tied to your right to liberty and...and happiness and freedom and all that, and, you know, it's inherent, tied up in all of that. But, there's nothing that's stated. The only people that have a right to education are the special needs students by law because there's federal laws that cover them, and the special needs parents are the ones by law who have to educate their children. Everyone else is a privilege to be educated and have...have...go to school.

So, I wasn't surprised. I personally was not surprised by that ruling. I felt that it falls in line with the sentiment and the...the hardening of the heart against primarily African-Americans or Black and brown poor people here in Detroit and everywhere else. It's sending that message. So, my question to that was, "If the children have no right to literacy, and they choose not to go to school, then you have no right to pick them up and you have to overturn all those juvenile laws." Sounds crazy, but you, legally, just made announcement that gave every kid basically a reason not to ever go to school.

So, if they're not in school, then it's up to the community to teach them and the families, and this is not something that's new or radical. This is something that we've always known in the community and in the families, you know. It's part of the history. So, if they close down all the schools, somebody's gonna say, "So what? We can just go and open up another school somewhere else." That's what Dr. [Gloria] House did when she did the African-centered schools. She and other teachers were fed up with the way their children were being taught in the schools so they formed their own school.

[0:46:32]

[Video stops to adjust for lighting]

HT: Do you need to adjust because of the lighting?

PB: Yeah, I'd like to.

HT: Okay. I just wanted to see where this was coming from.

[difficult to hear discussion about the light]

AH: Do I need to move?

HT: Nope. You're just fine.

[pause as they figure out the light situation]

AH: I haven't been in this church in a while. I used to be part of the...one of the Dunham Dance classes here. That was down in the gym years ago.

PB: Really?

AH: Yep. With Penny Godboldo.

PB: Was that before Pastor Barry [Randolph] came in?

AH: I have no idea. [laughs] I've been in this church, like, in different times. When I first started coming here, it was in the early [19]70s. I was in high school, and I worked as a junior counselor down the street. There was a...all this was mostly group homes for elderly and juvenile and homes that were holding centers to place while, you know, place the kids into foster homes. So, I started out on this road back when I was still in high school as a junior counselor. The pastor that was here at the time was a white guy. He was a hippie. [laughs] So, you know, we could come down here, and they had folk music. Everybody had, you know, flowers, and it was very cool, like hippie-like. [laughs] I felt good, the kids felt good. Something different.

HT: And would you like anymore...some more water?

AH: No, I'm okay so far.

HT: Okay. We're good.

[Video resumes]

[0:46:35]

PB: I want to come back and kind of loop this back into your earlier comments about the analysis of the water shutoffs being an act of war. So, if we broaden that to thinking about the water shutoffs and the school closures and the tax foreclosures collectively as an act of war, usually what we know about wars of this past century, there's usually a driving mission. So, what's the intent behind this particular war?

AH: Population removal to reduce this... I mean, Michi--Detroit, for...for...for what it's worth, it's still the largest African-American population regardless of how many people moved out or were driven out or got, you know, were told if you don't like it here, like Governor [Rick] Snyder said, you can move out. So, people did, but we're still a large Black population here. The motive is to shrink the city down. Now, I started hearing about this about 15 years ago. They were trying to shrink the city down to the size of Ann Arbor [Michigan], and that's why they started privatizing everything, started taking over the water works, the waterways, and everything else, creeks, rivers, and lakes, and trying to, you know, sequester all of that and move housing off of the land and then, boom, here we go, you know, 10 years ago we had what? Detroit Future City and the lie, "Oh, it's only an idea!"

But, that's a lie because I have friends who have elderly people who live in areas where they came in and just started, you know, either foreclosing on all the homes, running all the elderly people out. There were...there's still people in this city, unfortunately, elderly people, who have been paying rent all their lives who could've bought the home that they're in five or six times, and when they come to put them out, and they're saying, "Well, this is my life. I've lived here. I've paid rent. Is there some way I can just stay here?" They say no. And then, they're out. They said, "Oh, we're going to... It's just an idea."

But see, the idea started with the blackout of the city. When you have blackout of the city, then you have more crime, and then you get people moving out. When... Then, they had the...the...the union busting. We can't forget about the union busting, you know [laughs]. They went after all the...anybody that was in service work here. It doesn't matter. Police, fireman, you know, whatever. Teachers, whatever. Union busting happened, and then you have a reduction in safety, right? So now, you've got less firemen, less EMS [Emergency Medical Services] people, less police officers responding. People, you know... This is...there's a video on YouTube that came out a few weeks ago of the calls that were not being answered by the Detroit Police where people have...are witnessing shoot-outs in the street, and they're calling from sun up to sun down. People who have been assaulted, raped, calling from sun up to sun down, and the police never show up. But yet, the story that's told is that we have one of the best policing systems in the city or in the country or in the state or whatever.

But, the ultimate goal is to move the people out and shrink the city down. I want to say maybe, yeah, nine or 10 years ago, I ran into this woman. She was travelling. She was an enviro--an environmentalist, and she was following the takeover of parks and waters, and she was a researcher. She drove...she was driving back from the east coast to Detroit, through Michigan and back, and she was the person who told me about the takeover of Benton Harbor [Michigan], right. The whole shoreline that was given to the people of Benton Harbor, and now you have the great-grandson of Whirlpool [Corporation] in St. Joseph [Michigan] who became a...a...a house representative or senator up in Lansing [Fred Upton], and he decided to now work with those people to put Benton Harbor under emergency management, and now he's taking the whole shoreline and made it his private golf...golf course.

So, inside of all of these different things that are going on, right... So, this...I'm...this is gonna go back to how the ultimate motive is, right? So, this woman says, "Okay, well, they did...they're doing this in Benton Harbor, and I came down here to Detroit, and I went to the planning office"--and I wish and I hope that if you show this, this lady will see it one day, because I'm talking about her case where she filed amicus briefs in court to try and stop some of the stuff that was going on. But, she saw the plans of the city, how it used to be with all the

neighborhood playgrounds and parks and everything and then the new plan that had none of the playgrounds. All the green spaces in the neighborhoods were removed, right.

And then, I had gone to some meetings where they were talking about razing the East Side, exhuming graves at the historical gravesites and cemeteries on the East Side, to draw a new property line or borderline. And somewhere on the East Side where...around in that pocket where the historical cemeteries are, boom, here comes Hanson [Hantz?] Farms, and, you know, he's buying up lot after lot after block after block after block. So, I mean, it's to put it into the hands of a lot of, you know, private investors and people like that and shrink the city down. All of...all of...all of the new stuff is...is happening between the [Grand] Boulevard and Jefferson. Nothing else is going on around...on the outskirts. So, I said this, I don't know, 30 to 40 years ago. In Chicago [Illinois], you have all the rich people downtown and everybody else spread out, and that's how it's going to be here. Before, everyone was like just everywhere because of, you know, the spoke city, spoke wheel city stuff. Everybody has access, but I said that's going to happen here.

And, that's what's happening now, you know. So, I mean, like in my neighborhood right now, we have speculators. My neighbors and I sit on the porch every summer. We have coffee. We get up early at 5 o'clock, and we sit on the porch and drink coffee, and we watch all the people drive up and down our streets. Young white people moving in, looking. Real estate people taking pictures of our homes. This one...one...one group of people a couple summers ago, they came out, and they were taking pictures, and I said, "Stop taking pictures of my home." And it's, "Oh, we're just...we just love homes." I said, "Do not take pictures of my home." So, they... What they were doing, they were trying to see who was home, first, and what time we were home, and then they were looking for homes that looked like there weren't people living in it.

So, my neighbor was in the process of working on their home, and he...the windows were still kind of out boarded up or whatever. So, these people came up on the porch and started pushing on the door saying, "Oh there's nobody in here," and I kept telling them my neighbor is in there. "Oh no, ma'am." I said, you know--and I hate that. Don't tell me, "Oh no, ma'am," when I'm living in my

neighborhood. I know what's going on. They went to kicking on that door. They took a crowbar and tried to pry it open, and once they got that door open, they were met with somebody with a rifle pointing in their faces.

But, this is the type of stuff that goes on. You know, you just walk into the neighborhood and it's yours? You can do what you want? You know, we don't...there's no privacy rights? There's no anything? And they say, "Oh, well, your house, your neighborhood, whatever, it's public knowledge. We can look it up, you know, on the foreclosure rolls or the tax rolls or whatever." So what? That doesn't give you the right to come and take pictures of me or my child or anybody else's child. I don't know if you're gonna sell the pictures. I don't know, you know, if you're a pedophile ring, whatever. You don't do that. But, that's the type of brazen stuff that goes on.

And, this fear factor, you know. So, we've got all these people moving in, and eventually they're going to have, you know, the narrative is the people are here to fix up, right. This is the new Detroit. This is the, you know, we're saving Detroit. Over in Southwest Detroit, the people over there where the church is, where the water station is, they call themselves conquistadors moving in where the Mexicans were--are--where conquistadors are gonna come in [laughs]. You can go ask...ask Pastor Bill [Wylie-Kellermann] about that one. He wrote the article on that. But, just the whole thought of it where you can just walk in and do what you want and just, you know, they're supposed to be fixing up--the new narrative. We're fixing. But we're saying, "But, we never left. What are you fixing? You've been destroying. You haven't been really fixing anything." You know.

[0:57:26]

PB: I mean that's a narrative, right, to--well, not just a narrative, but the practice to clean, like, to just wipe out the city, have a clean slate, and then look at that clean slate as, like, a white wonderland.

AH: Right. And, that's what's happening because the thing is that a lot of the history is being erased out of all the neighborhoods. You had... There was a time--I

don't know if you could do it now. You go to City-County Building at the Coleman A. Young Center, and you could go to whatever and ask, "Where...may I have the list for all the block clubs in the city?" And, they used to have a giant list of every block club in the city, and because, you know, time goes on, people don't participate, the list, whatever. But now, they have the association list. They've put districts in the neighborhoods and stuff like this, so now the new associations and the new people have come and a lot of the old names of the block clubs are gone. They're calling themselves different things.

Like my street, our block club area was...had all of our street names, and some people came in and said, "Oh, that's too long." So now, we're called Woodward Village, and we actually have a sign [laughs] when you're coming out of Highland Park. There's a sign on Woodward that says, "Welcome to Woodward Village". There's a...there's a laundromat right there and a tuxedo, so we put up a sign there too, right, but there was some of us that said, "We wanna keep the history and, okay, if this is the way we're gonna go, we...we have to people that we want to keep the neighborhood, you know, preserved and...and clean and safe for everybody that's still living there." The...the interesting thing about my neighborhood is that mostly everyone I went to elementary school with, we came back. So, we inherited the houses that we grew up in. And so, the new people who are moving don't realize that we've been there for a long time. So, they can't come in and kind of run over us the way they do in other places because we have the history and we're not, you know, stupid, you know.

So, that's the name of that game, remove all of the historical names. They changed the names, the historical names of the streets, historical names off the schools, historical names off the buildings, whatever looks like it could be preserved and saved. In any other city, right, an older building would be preserved for something. They don't care about the fact that the schools had Pewabic tiles in them around the water fountains. Nobody cares about that. You know, you all know what Pewabic Tile is, down on Jefferson. Nobody cares about that history. So, they just tear it down. They don't care that we've...that we've had famous artists and painters come into the schools and paint murals on the walls. They just tear it down.

So, yes, you're right. Once they wipe it all out, erase everybody's memories, change all the street names, knock down all the buildings, then the people who are in my generation and older as we are getting older like our parents, we are the ones that have the historical memory, historical collective memory. After...after I think the next generation down, that'll be it because the younger ones will...will not have seen it and heard it, right. Like, no one can walk... I mean, there's very few people who can walk--you know where Blessed Sacrament Cathedral is on Woodward?

PB: If you're going towards...

AH: Towards Highland Park.

PB: ...it's on the right?

AH: Yeah. The big cathedral there. There's only a few of us who knew that there was a Firestone there where we all used to buy our bikes in the [19]60s. You know, [laughs] it's different. There were movie houses. There were ice cream parlors. There was all kinds of stuff up and down Woodward, you know. So, it's very important for us as we're talking and telling our histories and how we...how we lived and how we became activists and share our memories. This is how we are preserving the history, you know, through video and writing. Like, I preserve a lot of my stuff in my poetry, you know. And, this can be this form, this type of interview session collecting oral histories, whether it's by film or by tape or whatever. That's what can be used to teach other people the truth.

[1:02:32]

PB: Could you talk--since you mentioned your poetry--could you talk a little bit about your poetry and the roles you see poets and writers and artists having within movement work?

AH: Well, my poems started when I was a child, and I wrote my first poems when I was in...we were leaving from being traumatized here in Detroit to go back to the Philippines to recover from abuse and trauma and racism. So on the way to the Philippines, my mother taught me how to write Japanese haiku while we were in Tokyo [Japan], and I was like seven, and the first haiku that I wrote talked about how being in a different place, like in Tokyo, they didn't stare at us like they did here. Staring, you know, like my father being Black and my mother being a white-skinned Filipino, but they didn't know it. Because the miscegenation law was in place at the time, and we were what they call, you know, the N-word and zebras and animals or whatever. The children, us.

So, that's how I started my poetry, making an observation on what I noticed in the dynamics of how people look at people from a racial perspective. My poems, I write about social issues, global issues, jazz. I write about the city a lot, women's issues and concerns, international things that are happening. But, I have a tendency to take these problems and weave them together so that people can make the connections that this is not just a singular isolated problem that's going on here. It's connected to other things that are going on in the world. For example, the water shutoff here and the take over the water reminded me what happened to the water in Palestine. Right? So, they took over the water and the wells, they've taken over our water system here, and I wrote a poem about that.

I've written poems about my early experiences with racism as a child, being spat on, and I talk about how it feels, you know, that experience of being dehumanized as a...as a child, and I wrote about the [19]67 Rebellion, the things I witnessed from my front porch, victims I saw, the police harassment. So, all of my poems deal with that. Now, why I write like that is because I wanted to have the listeners get some piece out of it that they could relate to in hopes of...of being inspired to do social change. That was my motive for writing and, like I said, I started in [19]67 or [19]68, but I didn't pick it back up again until I was in my thirties full time.

And then, I started...I got involved with the National Poetry Slam. Then, I was a coach for the National Poetry Slam team for almost 10 years. So, what I started teaching the poets was that one of the things that happens in poetry, you know, it's very expressive, it's very emotional, it's a lot of stuff. But, you have children sitting at your feet, you've got an audience, and what we are doing--and it doesn't

matter what race you are, male or female, there's this negativity, this trauma that comes out in the poetry. There's some issues, some problem that's a concern, and what I was telling my students was after a while, it's almost like programming, right? You keep hearing the same problem over and over. Police brutality, somebody's, you know, killed, somebody's on drugs, somebody's on alcoholism, somebody got raped, somebody got this, somebody got that. And then, you hear regular poems, what I call regular poems, poems that relate to family and community. So, there's two sides of all of this stuff that's going on.

So, this is the voice of the poets and the artists. We have an obligation to tell the truth through our work, and it's also a venue for healing as well, right? So, I told my poets, you know, and I said this in one of my poems, what does a healthy neighborhood look like? What does a healthy relationship feel like? Look like? What is...what does a grocery store look like without bread that's been eaten by rats? You know, because I want the poets and the students and the youth to be able to sit down and write their way into another future. That old saying, that bibli--if you...without a vision, the people perish.

Well, that's what I'm trying to get the artists to do. That's what I've been trying to get poets to do for 25 years. I know all this stuff is heavy. Can you write your way out of it? Because once you start becoming a visionary and you can see--and that's how I operate, and that's how I see things. And people give me something, it takes me a minute. I have to sit down, and I'm not here. I'm not here. I'm five, 10 years ahead looking into the future of how we're gonna get from here to there. What's it gonna take, you know? And that is, you know, also leadership training and visionary training as well, right, and we have to get people out of that state, and, you know, it's gonna take a minute because we have so many people that are so traumatized with post-traumatic stress disorders, all kinds of things, right, a lot of baggage, a lot of hurt and pain that are in the people. But, there's also the other side of compassion, there's the other side of peace, there's the other side of love, you know?

And, that is what, you know, not just the poets and the artists and the writers have to express and have to share or, you know, that's responsible, if they feel that that's their responsibility or not. But, that's the other side of it. That's the healing part of it, right? If your head is too messed up--I used to tell my kids in the juvenile

center, when I...I...I used to do poetry and art therapy with my partner Ella. She was a fiber artist. My girlfriend and I--we were just friends, you know, and we were artists, and we just went into the juvenile facilities, and I would teach the kids poetry, and she would teach 'em art, and...and...and that's what I ended up doing too, you know. When your head gets messed up--even for law students. I've told my students who've gone to law school, "Uh, I can't get through the law." Like, go paint something for a minute. Just take a few hours and get some paint and paint it out 'cause you've got to...you have to put that energy somewhere, right?

So, the arts to me is a source of healing, and that's how I've used, you know, run my workshops. Poetry is a source of healing, you know, and we know that music, the musical notes and the sounds and everything, helps balance the brain cells, helps the children process math better and do math better and things like that. So, this, you know, this whole, you know, holistic thing that goes on here in Detroit. Most of us know it, right. We can be the poet, the artist, the musician, the educator, the activist. It all works in tangent, you know, and that's...that's how we're lucky here or blessed or lucky or gifted in Detroit. You know. We have a wealth of people here and a wealth of people who really, really love people. We're not the enemy. We're not stupid, you know. There's no... When we go out of town, people say, "Oh, you're from Detroit," and they get scared [laughs], or they want to hang with us [laughs]. You know what I'm saying? So, yeah.

[1:11:46]

PB: I'm curious about--this is maybe off topic, but--your role as Director of Education for We the People and what that looks like, what that entails because one of the things I'm interested in is that role of political education within movement space, what those conversations are looking like that you're having with people who are most impacted by the water shutoffs, and how you're engaging that on a more critical level.

AH: Right. Well, as the Director of Education, I help advise sometimes on the youth programs, and I'll run workshops. I go out and talk a lot on different panels. We have workshops for youth. We're writing books with our community research

collective. As a member of that, we have people from the community that are contributing, like with our water book. And now, we're working on the destruction of education. That's our next publication.

So, the education portion for me is not like I am a director, director like in the school or anything like that, but it's more grassroots. You know. My job as part of Director of Education not only just work on the hotline and get people information on where they can get services, because that's part of grassroots education, but also to--like what you're doing. Collecting lived experiences that can go into the publications that we work in, working with other activists, working with the youth, coming, working with the youth to come up with some...some of their own programming. I've done work with conflict resolution, how to deal with microaggressions and macroaggressions. Workshops. Things like that. I do them for the youth and for...in the community too.

[1:13:59]

PB: We talked a little bit about...

AH: And the water affordability too. That's part of the education too.

PB: And, that stuff's so complicated when you get into the weeds of it.

AH: So, when we're talking about... So, as the Director of Education and as a person who's working with the Freedom School movement, right? Freedom Schools just decided last month that we're gonna have a water school. So, I get to play two roles in two different organizations to help build a curriculum, vocabulary that youth can learn from. Just like we had children and youth at a couple schools that were using our water book from *We the People* as a start for learning about the water crisis and water affordability and things and what happens, you know, when you don't have water. So, we had that curriculum. Teachers made a curriculum out of that and taught it.

So with the water school now, we're focusing on, like, a little bit of the history and vocabulary and there's... I think Shea Howell's on the committee with me and Tom Stevens and a couple other members, Eric Porter, and we're trying to decide now how we're going to administer the curriculum, what's gonna go in it, how the kids are gonna learn that vocabulary of, you know, what is austerity? [laughs] What does it mean...what is a crisis? Why is water, you know, important?

So, one of the things we did last month to kind of kick off the interest for the water school is we had a talk and--at one of the events at the Charles Wright. We just passed out flyers in the neighborhood around Cass Corridor and stuff like that--and...and...and Wayne State [University] area--that has simple questions on it like: Is your water safe? Is your water shut off in school? What do you think about the water being shut off? Do you have water? Do you know someone who...who...in your neighborhood who doesn't have water? So, those types of questions, you know, are the basis for the discussion. And so, there were a few people that came. Not too much youth yet, but there were other people from universities and other organizations who came to the conversation. So, from that happening, once we get the curriculum going, those partners or people who want to partner with that effort could take away the curriculum, maybe go and teach it in their organizations so that, you know, everyone is kind of on the same page that this is really, you know, it's going to be in our hands to fix, you know.

We can't really...we have to push for the referendum for water affordability. When we fought for affordable water and the United Nations recognized our efforts from the We the People side and said that they were gonna make water affordability one of the main things, points that they're gonna really consider and work on, I was really floored because when we started this water effort--and I'mma say this: I'm not an attorney. I usually teach myself whatever law there is, but in investigating the...the stance of the U.N. on the water effort and looking at our own constitutional and state laws, there's nothing on either side that says that people have to have affordable water. They say you can have access to it, you know, it can be running from a stream, whatever, and they say it has to be safe, but it doesn't say it has to be affordable. The first white papers that I saw talking about that with the U.N. was about 10 years ago because I started reading U.N. documents trying to figure out, you know, what is going on in Africa, what do they have to say about water shortage in Africa, in India, in, you know, various places,

and, you know, where there's draught and, you know, food shortage. And, the basic line was, you know, you can have--we try to get you access to it, but they don't tell you it has to be affordable.

So, that's when we started pushing on the affordability and also the domino effect too. Because whenever I go out and talk and I'm on radio stations and talking to different people--I've been saying this for a while too--that everybody knows that Detroit is a ground zero, so whatever happens here will happen in your state too, you know. I said this to people I was talking to in Boston [Massachusetts], in Philly [Philadelphia, Pennsylvania]. I was in Ferguson [Missouri], St. Louis [Missouri] when we had--I'm part of the Truth Telling from Ferguson and Beyond group as well. So when I was in Ferguson, I was telling people about being a victim, right. Now, in Ferguson, you're victimized by the police and the hold-my-ground killing and stuff like that, and we had survivors and people who had been engaged in that whole effort around Mike Brown. But now, I'm switching the conversation and putting it in the terms of violence, and the water shutoff is a form of violence. The massive foreclosure is a form of violence. So, even though we're not being outright shot at, murdered, whatever, what is happening here that is--I've said is--killing the population slowly is the fact that we have systemic and structural violences committed against us every day.

And, this is, you know, why many people are stressed out, and this is why many of us are, like, getting into other types of natural type of living, healthy living, yoga, running, breathing exercises, meditation, herbal, you know, holistic type stuff because we understand the stress, you know. My average sleep pattern is every two hours, and that's because either, a, I can't sleep, or I'm up for three or four days. And, there was a time when I was working with the special needs parents that my phone rang 'round the clock starting at six o'clock in the morning, and I would take calls, people would text me at three o'clock in the morning, and I would just answer it because I didn't know. You see, you know, I don't know if...if...if somebody got hurt, and outside of that, you know, I work with victims, so I don't know if somebody needs shelter. Somebody could be calling me, you know, house burned down. Somebody's family got shot up, emergency care type stuff. That's what I was doing too inside of all the other stuff.

So, after a while, it started taking a toll on me, you know. And, I said, “Well, I’m just not gonna take phone calls after four o’clock in the afternoon anymore,” and that’s what I’ve been doing for the past five years. And, I won’t take calls before seven because, you know. I mean, it’s like... [laughs] it’s like being on the front lines all the time, right?

[1:22:43]

PB: And, you’ve got to rest.

AH: Yeah, and I never get a chance to rest in between all of that. And, like I said, as I’m getting older, it...it, you know, it’s starting to wear on me. But, you know. I figure, like my grandmother used to say, if I can lie down for three days that would be alright. [laughs]

[1:23:03]

PB: I want--we can start winding down. It’s about five after six. I want to ask you--because you mentioned it just before about how you’ve explained to others that Detroit is ground zero, and it’s a testing ground for... We see this globally, right? Like, Detroit is part of the same global system as Puerto Rico, the Philippines and Sri Lanka and Palestine and all these. What advice would you give to others as they have... Like, if austerity politics aren’t already at the door, if they’re down the block, what advice are you giving to people in different communities?

AH: People need to just organize. They need to organize. And, the other thing that I would tell people--because many of us here have done this--get used to failure. And what I’m talking about is the failure of government, the failure of not having the people who you voted in come and bail you out, you know. And, you know, I know how that sounds and how that may look, but if everything fails you, if the systems fail you, if the structures fail you, if the politics fail you, then you need to do something to organize yourselves and start from that center of

self-determination and independence and interdependence and community, you know. Because what else are you gonna do?

You could keep... You know, people vote and vote and vote. Try to get the best people in, of course. But then, it's up to you once you get the best people in, it's up to you and the group and the community to stay on those people to make sure that they're doing the right thing. You know, even...even if it's like, you know, law. Have people's law clinics like we do here. Teach yourself the law. Go to, like, the people from the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union], National Black Lawyers Guild, National Lawyers Guild. Get some volunteers together, have a series of law, you know, classes. You know, learn how to be a legal watcher. If you're going to a protest, even if you're not, know what to know, look for when crimes are being committed against you and the population. You know, some of us took street medic training, you know, and that's not just for protests. That comes in handy anywhere. Learn how to garden. Learn how to have collective food.

I know, it's...it's crazy to...that I'm hearing myself say these types of things, but it's very real. It's... As I'm talking, I'm...I'm...I'm getting glimpses of books that I read in my head, you know, as a child, you know, and war stories that my parents told me, you know, like surviving in World War II. Like I said, my mother was a...in prison camp during World War II when the Japanese invaded. So, I have these stories of my mother saying, "Well, you know, we had to collect up every grain of rice. We had to work together. We had to save stuff, you know, while we were running from the enemy." And, it's like that's what we're doing. We're running from the enemy. The only difference is that, you know, instead of the freedom fighters like in France, you know, going into Paris [France]--and Detroit is Little Paris [laughs], that they say, you know, with all the trees and everything. That's a nickname. Detroit [says French pronunciation] 3-D, right? As we're running from the enemy, what are we running to? Instead of meeting up in the mountains in the Swiss Alps, we're meeting in the coffee houses in people's neighborhoods in the backyards. And, it's...it's just weird--you know what I'm saying?--to live in the twenty-first century and be using the vocabulary and having the memories of 1942 or before where you have these great wonderful stories of people in war, war situations that they have these glimpses of hope, and they have these glimpses of unity and compassion and stuff like that that are coming up amongst the people.

But, that's what I would say to people. You know, if...if...if we don't have water affordability here, if we don't have protections here that protect young people and elder people and disabled people from having their lights and their heat shut off, right? You know we don't have it here. You know they're gonna shut the water off. So, if it's...if we're saying it's coming to you, everybody else should be looking at Detroit and saying, "Okay, we need to be working politically on water affordability. We need to make sure that the gas company and light company, you know, have some law in the state and the city and the county, have some law that doesn't allow these private companies just come in and turn the gas and the lights and the water off. We need to make some policy so that if you're sick"--and, you know, like we have a little bit of that here. You get a 21 day or something like that if you're...if you have an illness to keep the water from getting shut off, right?

[1:29:00]

So, whatever it is that we're doing here, you need to be working on it now. Don't wait 'til it comes to your door. Because, see, they started with New Orleans [Louisiana]. We were the next model after New Orleans. New Orleans got wiped out by natural disaster. They came here and created an economic disaster for Detroit. And then, Robert Bobb, Steve Wasko, that other man who was running the...the...the education...Department of Education for the United States [Arne Duncan], they all went down to New Orleans, and they came back and said that's what was gonna happen here in Detroit. Because the storm, the hurricane [Hurricane Katrina] had wiped out all the school systems, that was the golden opportunity for the people to come and set up the charter school systems and destroy public education. So, that's the same thing they did here, except for we didn't experience a hurricane. We experienced economic hurricane of dollars being sucked out and situations being fabricated and created to bankrupt or so-called bankrupt the city.

I mean, everybody, I mean, they...we're known all around the world. Detroit? The largest city? The first one that went bankrupt? Please. We weren't poor to begin with. This city had a great economic history, and the people who came in here wanted to remove this Black population out of here and take over whatever resources that we have. Think about it. What's the motive? We're sitting in a state on a river that has the freshest water on the planet. As old as our water system is

here in Detroit, it's the most efficient one on the planet. It was created and paid for by all the mostly Black population in this city through the taxes and property taxes. So when we say we own that water system, you better believe we mean it because our taxes paid for it. And now, they've privatized it and put in the Great Lakes Water Authority and put all the suburban people on it so they could suck the water out of here and then, you know, raise the water prices in the suburbs, but we're still paying for it. We're paying for all the suburbs and most of the people on this water system in Michigan 800 times more than everybody else. So what's the motive? I'm going back...I'm talking a circle going back to the question what's gonna happen to the city. Shrink it down, take over all the jewels. Come on. Belle Isle, it was a nice public park, now it's owned by the state. They say that we didn't clean it up, this, that, and the other. Okay, yeah, and? It's still...it was still public.

There's a... If you ever get a chance to interview Dr. [Gloria] House, she has a video, a documentary, on the taking of green spaces that she made back in the late [19]70s or early [19]80s, and part of it was filmed here, and part of it was filmed in Ohio, I think it was. And, they talk about what happens when they take over public parks. There's no place to go. There's no... You know, if you're on the river there's no place to go when it's super-hot. So what are you gonna do? You end up walking the streets if you're a kid. There's no place to really go and hang out. You're out in the street. Whatever. There's no place to go play ball. There's no place to run. There's no place to boat. What? So whadda you do? It's all, you know, it's all the design of destroying people and communities and poor people and working-class people, you know. So, that...that's, you know, one of the motives. Take the water. Take the water cleaner. We've got the best water cleaner on the planet sitting right downtown, and we're serving... I mean, if you look at our maps, if you go to We the People of Detroit and look on the map, you could see where the water pipeline runs all the way up north, but it's being filtered and cleaned down here. And, we've got some of the cleanest water on the planet. Of course you're not gonna have... You know, they can't...they can't understand how African-American, primarily African-American people kept it this long. It's a money-maker.

[1:34:25]

PB: I want to flip this question on its head and ask you... So, one of the things we've been asking everybody--and this is kind of like a...almost like a survey of organizers--is what's your vision for the future of Detroit? What would the city look like if organizers like you all at We the People and Independent Freedom Schools, what would the city look like if you were victorious?

AH: Well, first of all, I would like it to be the way that it was, populated, more populated, more neighborly, more schools. I mean, in the future, I mean, we've all...we've talked about this. I feel like my memories have and my mind has been stolen by the privateers, but we talked about, you know--and this...this stuff is not really new. We want to see cleaners, stores, healthy food stores, in our neighborhoods.

I mean, if I would...if I go to Brooklyn [New York], and I can walk out of my friend's house, and there's two different grocery stores on each corner, why can't we have that here? Fresh food right there on two ends of a block. Why can't we have neighborhood libraries? Why can't we have our community centers reopened? That's what I wanna see. Why can't we have our playgrounds back? Why can't we have our playgrounds back clean? If we're gonna have services, why can't we have garbage pickup without the people, you know, being involved with, you know, corruption and taxing us just out of our heads? Why can't we have lower property taxes like our rich neighbors? You know. Why can't we have learning centers like other cities? Why can't we have the technology that's in the schools like other places? Why can't we have intellectual freedom? Why can't we have it so that people who are smart and who are intellectuals aren't looked down upon and run out of here as if we're crazy? Why--what's wrong with the worker? Why can't we have workers? Why can't we have labor back? What's wrong with the union? What's wrong with equal wages for women? That's what I want to see. What's wrong with fair wages, what's wrong with equal? Why can't everybody have access to a bank loan? Why can't everyone have access to grants to fix up their homes except for certain people? That's what I want to see. Why can't we have historical preservation? Why can't we have better services for the disabled? Why can't I have more bus fare, more bus lines like we used to that are affordable? Why can't we have buses that are not overcrowded? I want to see that. Why do we have to have people on the street who are in wheelchairs that are left and run over and splashed on by buses after waiting in the cold? We need something to improve that. I don't wanna see any more police brutality. I don't wanna see any

more profiling. I don't want to be fined for having an urban garden or my backyard garden wider than so many feet. Why should I be taxed on that? I have to make a permit on that? I don't want to see that in the future.

[1:38:28]

PB: I feel like you just gave us that in a poem form.

AH: It probably is, you know, stream-of-consciousness poem. [laughs] There you go.

PB: Hey, it flowed. Well, is there anything that we didn't touch upon that you want to get on the record?

AH: We're not dead yet. Detroiters are not dead yet. Yet. And, we probably won't be. We... Detroit is full of people that come out of activism, a history of activism, a history of fighting. We haven't given up, and we won't. And, don't believe the lies. Really, don't believe the lies and be careful who you talk to because a lot of people who you think are your friends are really the ones who are trying to take you over. Be smart about where...who you talk to and where you go. I've been saying this for a while, since the emergency managers. It's like a sick joke, right? Detroit is like a Star Trek episode. You never know when you're gonna run into a Borg, right? And, they'll get you, and they'll turn you out with a bag of chips and a Target gift card to win you over, to become one of them.

PB: Surprisingly, this is the second Star Wars reference we've heard today in relation to what's going on.

AH: Yeah, Borg city. I'm telling you.

[1:40:23]

PB: So, the last question I have is--Mama Lila [Cabbil] was part of building out this project with DEAL [Detroit Equity Action Lab], so one thing we've been conscious of asking folks who knew her in the course of these interviews...

AH: Mama?

PB: Mama Lila?

AH: Oh, Lila.

PB: Is if...if you have a memory or anything you want to speak about her legacy in this city. What we're doing is gonna compile those segments and get that to her family.

AH: One of the things... Well, I met Mama Lila a long time ago when I was working with the political science department at Wayne State with Dr. Otto Feinstein in a program called the Wayne State Youth Urban Agenda Project that was headed up by Dr. Feinstein, and there were people who were involved with Peace and Justice leg of it, and we would all meet, and then we had educators. We were working on adult education at the time. And, I believe that's where I met Mama Lila at Wayne State at one of those forums. And then later, I don't know, about, maybe three years ago? We all ended up at a retreat for activists, and that was one of the things that I remember. That, you know, with Mama Lila and other folk, like Shane Bernardo, who I think helped organize it, and other activists, this was the first time I had seen a group of activists actually take a respite in my entire life. So, it was really good to see that, you know, and see her at that respite. And, she's done, you know, a lot of great things and influenced people with her work at the Rosa Parks Center. Yeah. But, she...she dedicated her life to helping people.

PB: Thank you.

AH: You're welcome.

PB: Appreciate you taking the time...

AH: Thank you.

PB: ...and sharing your wisdom with us.

AH: I hope I didn't, like, ramble too much.

PB: No, you didn't at all.

AH: Okay. Good.

PB: No, this was good.