

**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

**Nicole Hill**

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER AND ORIANA YILMA

May 25, 2019

Detroit, MI

## Narrator

Nicole Hill is originally from New Orleans, Louisiana. She moved to Detroit, Michigan after Hurricane Katrina. In 2013, she became involved in activism around water shutoffs. She is involved with the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization, the People's Water Board, the Poor People's Campaign, and the Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition. She is currently one of the Michigan tri-chairs of the Poor People's Campaign and a Community Outreach Organizer for the Work for Me DTE campaign.

## 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

Nicole Hill discusses the water shutoff crisis in Detroit. Topics include her personal experience of water shutoffs, what it's like to live without running water, the inaccuracy of the Detroit Water Department, how people were afraid to speak up about water shutoffs because Child Protective Services might take their children, the racism in narratives about the water shutoffs, how the shutoffs aided those trying to gentrify Detroit, the public health issues created by the water shutoffs including her own bout with bacterial pneumonia, why the shutoff moratoriums happened, and the water affordability plan.

She also discusses emergency management, the Detroit bankruptcy, how other activists have influenced her, her tense relationship with city officials including Mike Duggan and Gary Brown, educational issues in Detroit, and her experiences dealing with negative media and Internet comments. She also speaks about her belief that citizens can take democracy back if they start caring about other people and get involved in activism, the importance of voting, why storytelling encourages activism, and the many forms that activism takes. She also discusses

her vision for the future of Detroit and how her kids have been influenced by her activism work.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 25, 2019 with:

Nicole Hill [NH]

Detroit, MI

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

**NH:** My name is Nicole Hill, and I'm originally from Louisiana, came up here, dislocated or--due to Hurricane Katrina--and decided to come back to Detroit [Michigan] because I had lived here off and on, had family here--or so I thought--and became affiliated with, initially, Michigan Welfare Rights Organization and the People's Water Board in like 20...late 2013, early 2014. And through them, I got connected to the Poor People's Campaign: [A] National Call for Moral Revival. I'm currently one of the Michigan tri-chairs of that. And through my organizing work, I now am involved with the Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition, and I'm a Community Outreach Organizer for the Work for Me DTE campaign.

[0:01:09]

**OY:** Could you describe your neighborhood growing up?

**NH:** My neighborhood growing up was... Now that I'm an adult, I realize that it was a really beautiful neighborhood, but when I was a child, it was a prison neighborhood because everybody knew everybody so you couldn't do anything 'cause if you go a block over they're like, "I'm gonna tell your mother. I know what you're doing!" But now I really, like, see how the neighborhoods are now, and I

value that close-knit community because not only did they rat you out all the time, but someone was always looking out for you, too.

And now, it's this disparity where if you see someone's child in danger, you're almost scared to say something to them because you don't know how the parent is gonna react. You know, like, maybe like, I think it was maybe like four years ago, it was a little girl that stayed across the street from us, and the mom kinda was the type of parent that pushed her kids out the door and don't watch 'em, and the little girl was trying to get in the street to get to the ice cream truck, and a car was coming, and, you know, you go into panic mode. I'm like, I can't reach her 'cause I'm in my door looking, and I scream at her really loudly, like, "Get out that street!" And this lady's like, "Why are you hollering at my kid? Who do you think you are?" And I'm like, "She's about to get smashed by a SUV!" And she was a smaller child, so the SUV technically wouldn't have even seen her over...over his, you know, vantage point, so you know, that...I think we have a lot more of that in communities now versus like, "Oh, Miss So-and-so across the street said you were doing what? I'm gonna kick your butt. She's gonna kick your butt, and it's not gonna happen again."

It's now, it's not a village raising a child. They... People keep saying they want that, but then they want to censor what you say to your child, which I understand is a double-edged sword because you do have these people out there that are like very disrespectful to people, including children. But for the most part, most people... I always tell people, if your kids are around my kids, I'm gonna treat 'em the same way I treat my kids. If you don't like it, keep your child at home. So, that's the type of parent I am, but I realize that other parents are not that way. So, I wish we could have kind of like some more semblance closer to the generation or the neighborhood that I grew up in versus now.

[0:03:41]

**OY:** So, how has the city changed since then?

**NH:** It's a lot more gentrified, I notice that, and the...the...most of the neighborhoods seem to be a lot more run down because I literally--like, the neighborhood I live in now is like off of Greenfield between...Greenfield and Southfield right off of Warren. I had an aunt that lived over there when I was younger. Like, there was no such thing as an abandoned or vacant house over there. Now, I look at where I live at, and there's three houses missing directly next to me which is a big open field which is also owned by the city, and they never come and cut it, so now the grass is like this [holds hand up to indicate great height]. And then, my grass is like this [holds other hand close to the ground, and my son is like, "I just don't have the energy to keep going over through that field, Mom." And the guy at the other end is like, "I'm not cutting it. It's not my property."

So, we have this big gap, or we have a lot of abandoned houses that are, I personally feel, could be given to low-income people, offer them low-income loans so that these properties are now owned which gives some people that may not have a chance at ownership a chance. It builds revenue for the city because now these people have to pay property taxes 'cause they own a home. This may be your--their dream to do that, and they can't afford it. They might have had bumps on their credit. They might just have a low income, and you could offer them this instead of waiting till the houses get completely dilapidated and destroyed and then say, "Oh, let's put 'em on the auction block," you know. And then, someone buys it and realizes that everything's been completely stripped out the house, everything's been completely stripped off of the house, and, oh, by the way, there are like some crackheads staying in the back, you know, 'cause somebody's broken into it because they probably need a place to stay, which brings it to the homeless component because all the shelters are like down this way, so if you live out where I live at and you have no money, how are you gonna get to the shelter? You're gonna walk from Greenfield and Warren downtown, and then there's a chance that when you get there they may not have any space available? Because they don't come pick you up. So, we have a...a homeless population wandering out in the communities because they don't have a lot of places to go in the community. So, they do start breaking into houses, finding roofs over their heads. I mean, this is Michigan. It's scalding in the summer, and it's freezing in the winter. I'd do the same thing. So, I think if they offer more opportunities for people, it would increase revenue for the city, and it would take a lot of what they claim to be the undesirables out of the community because

they'll have a home. So, yeah. That's kind of like my take on the community. And, I'll sometimes go off on a preaching tangent.

**OY:** That's fine!

**NH:** Yeah.

[0:06:43]

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

**NH:** Ooooh. Racism actually has a couple of faces. One of 'em is Dan Gilbert. Another one is our illustrious mayor [Mike Duggan]. Racism...the best way I can describe racism is to give you some of the comments that people said about people during the height of the water shutoffs was stuff like, "Oh"--we actually had people record people that said, "Oh, these Black people just don't want to pay their bills. They're making it hard for suburbanites. If they want free water, they should go jump in the river." Or, "Let them go down to the river and get water." Or, one--Quicken Loans did an....a...a video--of course, with his employees, Dan Gilbert did. And they're like, "Well, I would like to see their bank accounts, if they got 'em, and see where they're spending their money at," and even the Deputy Director at the time who was Darryl Latimer, who's a Black man, said, "Well, these people are so busy trying to buy Jordans for their kids, high-priced cell phones, pay ca--get cable TV, and all this."

And I'm thinking, like, my water was cut off at the time he said that, and I didn't even own a TV. And I don't buy Jordans because he makes his shoes in a sweatshop anyway, and I'm not buying them for my kids, so. I'm thinking like, so I'm sitting here budgeting every month. Now, because of the higher increase in the water, robbing Peter to pay Paul, trying to figure out if I could just give DTE [Detroit Edison Energy] this much so I can pay my water bill, or maybe I can talk to my landlord and kinda, you know, give him part of the rent and then give him the

rest so I can pay a water bill. What about the people that are like that? Everybody is not out doing that.

Now, I... Don't get me wrong. There are always gonna be people who don't prioritize their bills. They prioritize their wants over their needs. There's always been people like that. But for the majority, most of these people were trying to pay their bills, and they had incidents where either the rates have increased too much, or, in my case, it wasn't just that. It was a number of clerical errors on behalf of the water department that led to my water getting cut off and my bill being so high. And to this day, they have not admitted that. But--well, I'm not gonna say they didn't admit it. I'll say the higher-ups didn't admit it. There's always been employees that are just like, "This is my job. I'm gonna do my job." And they do, but when it comes to referring this information to a higher-up, they kinda shut it down because that's embarrassing for them to look like they did that much mismanagement with people's accounts, which they have.

[0:09:44]

**OY:** How did you first become active in organizing work in Detroit?

**NH:** I kind of always have been active in some type of organizing 'cause my mom was, and I was a movement kid, so I got drug everywhere and it was like, "Well, you can do this," you know, "The kids can do this." But like seriously was in 2013 when I just started hearing about all the shutoffs, and I started noticing people in my community getting shut off and in my neighborhood getting shut off. And I was, you know, a little skeptical at first because, like I said, there are people that don't pay their--my sister didn't pay her bill for two years! I mean, I know they do this. But I started, you know, asking people questions, and I realized, like, people didn't want to talk about it. So, I just kind of monitored my neighborhood and saw how many people were getting shut off, and I didn't go in and invade their privacy. I just kind of noting, like, okay, they shut off three houses on this block today, or they shut off five houses down the street today. And then, this went on like through the end of 2013, the beginning of 2014. And then, in May of 2014, they came, and they cut my water off.



And I know that, like, it doesn't apply to all communities, but in our community, I think a lot of people really didn't realize that their water was getting cut off when it did because we always had like major water main breaks in our neighborhood at least twice a year, like once when the ground thawed out in the spring and once when it got like really freezing in the wintertime. And like, the water department never came and told residents, like, we're cutting your water off temporarily while we fix this. You'd just get up, and your water would be off and maybe somebody--we had started to the point where people in the neighborhood that connected would drive around and be like, "Oh yeah, they're over there on such-and-such a block. They're over there with water flowing through the streets and...so that's why our water is off." But, you know, the water department didn't take the consideration to put something on the website or, you know, do a newscast or just have the workers say, "Water's gonna be off in the neighborhood." So, I think a lot of people would be thinking that would be going on, and then they would later discover, oh, my water's actually cut off. Everybody else's water is not running slow or off as well.

And so, when my water got cut off, it was a shock 'cause I had literally just gave them, like, 450 dollars two days before that, and they cut my water off, and I knew that immediately that there was some mismanagement going on because when they cut my water off, that morning I had gotten up, and I had gotten the kids ready for school, and I took...I walked them to school at the end of the block, came back to wash the breakfast dishes. Nothing came out the sink. Like, literally 15 minutes before that, water was flowing 'cause I cooked and everything. The kids got ready for school. And so, I went outside, and my neighbor was next door. He's an elderly gentleman, and I was like, "Is your water acting funny?" And he was like, "Let me go check 'cause you know how they are," you know. And he's like, "Well no, my water's flowing," and I'm like, okay, let me ask another neighbor 'cause it could just be a fluke with him. And I asked a couple other people, and they were like, "No, our water's running fine." And so, I started thinking, I'm like, "Did you see a truck out here?" And he was like... I said... He said, "From the water department? No."

And, the reason people weren't seeing water department trucks is because the city had did a--at that time, it was 5.7 million dollar contract with Homrich, which is a demolitions company. They were supposed to tear down the abandoned and

dilapidated houses, but then they were like, "Oh, guess what? We can have you cut off people's water, and they won't be able to do anything 'cause they won't know." Because people were coming out like confronting Water Department workers like, [claps] "You're not about to cut my water off," standing over their curb [inaudible] like, "Not today," saying, "Not today." But when you don't know your enemy, then you can't work to defeat him. And so, Homrich was going around cutting off people's water. And so, he said, "Well, I saw a...a red truck out here, but I didn't think anything of it 'cause, you know, it's not a Water Department truck." So I'm like, "Okay." I went back in the house, and I called the water department, and they're like, "Yes, you have indeed been disconnected for lack of payment." And I'm like, "But, I just gave you 450 dollars on the ninth. It is the twelfth of May." And they're like, "Well, your bill's like 3,000 dollars." And I'm like, "How is my bill 3,000 dollars?" And they're like, "Well, we don't know. It just shows that it's actual usage, and it's 3,000 dollars.

So I'm like, okay, I got to figure out something. I got three kids in the home, you know, and I need water. It's the middle of the summer. So, I immediately leave, and I pick up my youngest daughter, who's then like six-and-a-half, almost seven, because she had a half a day. And I'm like, let me go to the Department of Human Services. And so, I go to the Department of Human Services, and I'm like, "Well, I need to apply for an SER," which is State Emergency Relief. And she's like, "For which," you know, "utility?" And I'm like, "For water." And I'm like, "Is it 150 dollars they give you?" And she's like, "Well, no, we went up to 175," like that's, you know, such a big deal. But, okay. And so, she's like, "Well, give me your information. I need to call the water department." Literally, it took me 45 minutes to walk to the...to a welfare office. I didn't have a car at the time. Still don't have a car. I have a rental, but I didn't have that either. And literally in the 45 minutes it took me to get to the Department of Human Services, my bill, when she called, they told her my bill was 5,000 dollars.

So, you got to get...grasp the concept. I mean, I know all of you are smart, but like that means that my bill went up 2,000 dollars despite my water being disconnected. How that happen? So, I started going...she was like...she's looking at me like, "She came here and asked for help and just told this bold-faced lie," you know, and I'm like, "There's no way my bill is now 5,000 dollars." And I'm like, "I swear she told me it was 3,000 dollars." And the worker's like, "I believe you." She's like, "You're not the first person that came in here that they've like..." She's

like, "I don't know what's going on with them. They've just...they're not handling their business." So she said, "Well, we'll...what we'll do is offer 175 dollars, and we'll put it on like a payment key, put it on a payment plan with that." And they said, "Well, that's not gonna do anything, and we're not gonna accept it." And so, the worker's like trying to go back and forth with whoever she's...the customer service rep she's speaking to. She's asking to be connected to a supervisor, and of course it's always, "I'm a supervisor," or, "A supervisor isn't available." That's always their excuse.

[0:17:10]

And so, eventually she goes back and forth and doesn't really get a resolution, and she hangs up, and she goes, "Well, I'm gonna keep working on this, but I do have to inform you of some things." And so, I'm sitting there, my...my six-year-old's sitting there looking like, "Can we just go get a Happy Meal?" And she goes, "I have to tell you that lack of water in your home is grounds for removal of your children." And of course, my...my six-year-old is not the dumbest six-year-old, so she knows what removal means. She like goes to screaming and hollering, and I just get up like I gotta go. I gotta figure something out. I'm not letting 'em take my kids.

And I'm just walking, and I think I kind of went into like a fight-or-flight syndrome, and I'm walking and I'm thinking and I'm walking and I'm trying to figure out what I'm gonna do and what my next step should be, and my neighbor around the corner is like trying to get my attention, and I'm like totally not hearing her 'cause I'm in a zone. And she finally comes up and touches me, she's like, "What the hell is going on?" And I'm like, "They cut my water off, and they're trying to take my kids." And she's like, "They who?" And I'm like, "I guess the Water Department cut it off, and I just..." She was like, "Did you go to the...to the welfare office?" And I'm like, "I just came from there. They couldn't help me, and they said they would have to take my kids." And I'm like, "I got to figure out something. I got to get them out of the house." And she's like, "Well, you know, your son and my son are friends. Your son can stay around here with my son. You know, he'll still be able to go to school." And I'm like, "I'll just figure out somewhere for the girls to go." So I'm like, "Okay, that's a little bit of a help."

And she's like, "You need to call the news." 'Cause I'm telling her like, "They said my bill was 3,000 dollars. Just paid them 450 three days ago. By the time I got to the office, it was 5[000]." And she's like, "Something is wrong. You need to call the news." So, I called all the new--local news stations and got no help from any of 'em. Like, Channel Two was never called me back. Channel Four was like, the literal editorial director, Tony Statz--yes, I'm putting his name out there--told me he didn't see a story, but if I got my water back on, they would come out and do a story on me. And I'm like, "So, my bill jumping 2,000 dollars in less than an hour is not a story? It clearly shows something's wrong on the part of the Water Department." And he's like, "Well, we don't see, like, a...a story, a news-worthy story. So I'm like, "Okay."

So, I go back home, and at this time I was still in school. I had decided to go back to school and get another degree, and I called my aunt who was like 70 years old at the time, nearest relative, and I'm like, "Can the girls come over there and stay?" And she's like, "What's wrong? I hear it in your voice." And I'm like, "I just need the girls to come over there." And she's like, "You gonna tell me what's going on 'cause do I need to get my pistol?" And I'm like, "Okay." [slaps leg] So, I told her everything that was going on, and she was like, "Well yeah, all of y'all can come over, you know that's no problem." And I'm like, "Well, Bobby's gonna be at his friend's house."--that's my son. And then I said, "I just need you to take the girls." I'm like, "I've worked too hard to like regain the few items that I have from coming up here from the hurricane, and I'm not in the most safe neighborhood."--we'll put it that way. I wasn't scared of people, but they did do a lot of break-ins over there. So, I'm like, "I'm gonna stay at home because, you know, I don't want anybody to break into the house, plus I have some papers to type up and, you know, I'm just gonna work on my...my school work." So, she's like, "Oh, you sure?" And I'm like, "Yeah." And she...I sent the girls over there. She picked up--came and got my youngest daughter and then picked my other daughter up from school. And she was like, "Your mom needs some time to yourself--herself," and just left it at that 'cause I really didn't want them to be stressing out and worrying at that point.

And so, about 1:30 in the morning, there was a knock on my door, and it was the Detroit police, and they have my six-year-old with them, and my aunt came walking up the driveway, and she's like mouthing to me like, "I didn't tell them

anything about the water.” And I’m like, “What is going on?” And they’re like, “Tell your mom what you told us.” And she’s like, “I just want to be at home with you.” And she’s like, “Tell them...” He was like, “I’m gonna tell you what happened.” He said, “She was walking down Seven Mile Road”--from my aunt’s house trying to get to our house--“and she just met a random stranger on the street and was like, ‘This is my address. Can you take me home to my mom?’” And just luckily, it was a good Samaritan, and he was like, “This...this makes no sense, this six-year-old.” He flagged down a police car and was like, “I don’t know what’s going on. This six-year-old just came up to me talking about she’s trying to get home. I don’t know if she got away from an abductor or what’s going on, but, you know, I don’t feel comfortable dealing with it, and I don’t feel comfortable leaving her out here either.” So, the police got her, and I guess she eventually told them like, “Well, I was at my aunt’s house, and I wanted to get home.” And so, they brought her, and they were like, “I don’t care what’s going on. Kids are more resilient than you give ‘em credit for. Let your little girl stay at home.” So, I’m thinking in my head like, “Oh, my God.”

They’re like... I bring her in the house, and they go and drop my aunt back off at home, and I’m like, “Oh my God, now I have a kid in the house, and I have no water. How am I...what am I gonna do?” And of course, my kids being who they are, soon as the other one’s like, “Well, I can come home too! She home, I’m coming home.” So now, I’m back to square one. I’m in a home with no running water and three children.

And so, I just started my journey on living without water, which I would have to go to the store and buy like two and a half gallon jugs of water at a time, and I would buy like four of those and just bring ‘em to the house. And like--I’ve told this story so many times, so I hope it doesn’t sound like it’s just too easy, but I’ve told it a million times. As disgusting as it sounds, you learn how to do things like recycle water. So, the thing is is that you change your whole lifestyle. First of all, anything you eat that would require you to cook with water that where it would evaporate, you don’t eat it. So, you don’t eat rice. You don’t eat, like, potatoes. You don’t eat anything where you’re gonna have to use the water in the pot to make a sauce, anything, because then you can’t get another use out of that water. So, you start doing that you...which means you tend to go--move forward towards frying everything or baking everything. Those are your, like, best options. So, you try to figure out how you can get, like, usages out of water and still be somewhat

sanitary. So like, I'm not gonna take the water that I clean my chicken in and use it to wash dishes, you know. But what you do is you normally try to take everything that you use water for--washing dishes.

The last thing you think about is cleaning your house because you're like if I put this water on the floor, I can't use it for anything else. So, you try to keep your house as clean as you can, or what I did--which was definitely something I would not advise you to do--is use straight cleaning products, no water. So, I would use straight bleach to clean everything in my house. I would not add any water to it. I used straight PineSol to clean the house and add no water to it. So like, my house was clean, but you couldn't breathe when you walked in there, you know. You couldn't breathe when you walked in there. And so, then you take every... When you wash dishes, you have a bucket you pour water, the dirty dishwater, in. If you scrub out a few clothes on your hand, you pour water in the--you pour that into the...the...the bucket, and then you use that to flush your toilet and because you don't do that constantly, you literally probably only flush your toilet once a day because you don't want to have to keep generating water to flush the toilet. So, you keep your lid down, you keep your door closed, and that's how you live. And mind you, this is the middle of the summer, so this is just like, "Okay..."

So you do that, and so then I'm const--or, better yet, you almost kill yourself, which I did, because I poured straight bleach into the toilet, even though I knew what I was doing because I did pass chemistry. It was a necessity because that literally like kind of like fumigates the biological waste--but you pay for it because if you even attempt to do this [inhales] while you're in there, phhhh, you might be on the floor next to the toilet. So, you wear masks, you pour the bleach straight in the toilet, you hurry up and slam the lid down, you close the door, and you tell nobody to go in that section of the house for about 35 minutes, and then you flush it down. And then it's like, okay. Whoo. Okay. We made it. We made it through this.

[0:26:51]

So, that's how I lived for about two months, and shockingly, even though I'm not bitter--'cause remember I said don't be a bitter person, but I do remember things.

No one in my neighborhood said, "Oh, your kids can come over to take a shower. You can come over here and use our water hose." Nothing like that. Like, everybody just went about their daily lives like nothing was going on. It was just like, you know, I think a lot of people do that, and they really...they literally just like phase those people out like, ope, nope, we're not gonna pay any attention to them, just ignore them like the ugly little uncle you keep in the back closet that everybody knows is like really jacked up and crazy. You're just like Uncle Pete's not even there. We just leave him in this room. We're not gonna do anything. And that's how they do, and that's horrifying because that means that you have no semblance of community. I mean, yeah, everybody's struggling to pay their bills, but if we're all struggling together, we should all help each other together, too. So, I mean, would not have killed someone to give a gallon of water, you know, or you know, could've said, you know, "My kids are playing in the sprinkler. Your kids can come over." And I could just like, you know, throw a bar of soap over there, you know, just random.

So, I lived like that for two months. I...I didn't know who to contact, so--because, ironically, I learned about Michigan Welfare Rights because I was trying to put together a community resource list for my same community. And so, I was like, well, I guess I'll call them. Maybe they can do something. And, I called them. I spoke to Ann Rall, and the first thing she told me, she said, "I need to get your account number and check your water bill." So she did, and she went back two years to May of 2012, and she's like, "How the hell is your bill this big?" And she said, "I just calculated all your payments, not including the 450 you just paid them, and you've paid them 2,895 dollars in water bills in two years." And she's like, "That makes no sense. Like, why are you paying almost 3,000 dollars in water bills? That means you pay 1,500 dollars a m--a year in water alone." And she's like, "What did they tell you?" And I'm like, "Well, they asked me to check for leaks. They asked me to see if I had any running toilets, drippy sinks, and they told me I had to pay for a plumber to come out to check all of my plumbing."

So, kinda got a deal on that 'cause one of my older son's friends had been going to be a plumber, and he was in the process of getting his journeyman's license, so he came and checked everything for me. And he's like, "There's no way you have a leak in any of your pipes." He was like, "Your pipes go out to the lawn, out to the curb, out to the Water Department's pipes. If you had a leak in your pipes," he said, "you would have a sinkhole in your grass because the water would be coming

up soaking the ground.” He said, “If there’s a leak in anything, it’s in their pipes and in their infrastructure, and the flow is not coming into your house good.” He said, “That’s the only way you could have any type of leaks.” So, he checked that. None of my toilets were running. Kids weren’t leaving the--I mean, my son was like 12. I could barely get him to get in the shower. I mean, he wasn’t using excess water. Y’all know y’all go through that phase.

And so, I just was trying to figure out like where could this come from. So, I kept calling the Water Department asking different questions. Ann connected me to and Michigan Welfare Rights connected me to Alice Jennings, who was in the process of starting a class action lawsuit against the Water Department. They were also dead-set in the middle of the Detroit bankruptcies at that time. So, I started going in...sitting in to the bankruptcy hearings, hearing what...hearing the--I don’t know what to call it. It’s not even bullshit. I don’t... It’s not even that good. I don’t know what to call what the Water Department directors were saying or what the city itself was saying in the bankruptcy. It was...when I...it was horse pucky. It was horse pucky because--I always use the analogy when I tell this story--if I’m a parent, I’m not gonna lie and tell you that I know everything my kids do. I don’t. But when they’re under my roof and I’m watching them and I’m there, I know everything that’s going on ‘cause that’s my job. I know if you let somebody in the house. I know if you were trying to sneak somebody out the house. I know everything.

Sue McCormick, the direc--then-director of the Water Department got in court, and Alice Jennings and some of the other lawyers that were involved questioned her. And they said, “Well, can you tell us how many homes have been shut off?” “I have no knowledge.” “How many of those homes that were shut off were occupied?” “I have no knowledge.” “How many had sick, disabled, parents, children, elderly in it?” “I don’t know.” So, you just started a mass shut off campaign, you have no idea who you were shutting off, no idea if the homes were even occupied or if these persons were in positions where not just--well, I mean, everyone needs water, but in a position where water was of vital importance to them. I mean, these people shut off homes that had people in it that reside on feeding tubes. You have to clean a feeding tube. You have to! And they shut them off, and they didn’t even blink an eye in doing it. It just... They’re un...unconscionable. They have no conscience. I don’t even think they have a soul. And I was sitting there, and I’m just listening to her, and I’m thinking like, “How is



she running the Water Department? She has no idea what's going on." And of course, she lives in Ann Arbor [Michigan], so, you know, she's not that concerned about Detroit, you know. And Darryl Latimer basically concurred what she said, like, you're the deputy. So, that's basically like saying the President and the Vice President have no idea what's going on in the country, but everybody else can figure it out.

And I started sitting in on the bankruptcy hearings, and I think Darryl Latimer got on Channel Two. I believe it's called Rip It Up [Let It Rip?], and he made that statement about the cable TVs and the shoes, and he was like, "And if anyone out there needs help and they come to me, I can help 'em because we don't know who is choosing to not pay or who can't pay. We have no knowledge of which is which. So, we're just shutting off everybody basically." And Ann [Rall] caught him in the hallway one day, and she said, you know what she said on TV? "I got somebody for you." And she introduced him to me, and she told him, she said, "Her water's been off for almost two months now." And he said, "Well, I, sure, give...give my office a call in the morning. We'll work something out." So, I called. I went down to Mich...Michigan Welfare Rights, and I called from there, and I called his office, and he was like, "Well, I'll...I'll help you get your water back on. I promise you that." And he said, "How much can you afford to pay?" And Ann goes, "Tell him you can't pay any more than 150 dollars." So I said, "150 dollars."

He said, "Okay. But, you have to get the smart meter." And I'm like, "I don't want the smart meter," because I had heard stories of the smart meter giving people cancer in California. Like, they banned 'em out there. And I'm like... And he's like, "Well, that's the only way--'cause we're switching everybody over to the smart meter--that we can restore your service." So, I said, "Okay, fine." And I said--well, and so Miss [Alice] Jennings said, "Well, yeah, that's okay. Pull the meter, but we want you to check the meter when you pull it, the old meter, to see if it was defective." Never got that report. So, they put the smart meter in. I'm waiting to get my water on. It's July 12, and I'm like, it's been two months. They're gonna cut my water on today. I mean, this is like, you know, when you wake up on Christmas and you get exactly what you asked for. And I'm like, "They're gonna cut my water back on."

And he comes out, they have workers come out, and they go, "Oh, you can't get your water cut on today." And I'm like, "Why?" And he said, "So, you know, when we put the smart meter in, there's these pipes that go from the meter up to your pipes in the basement. Well, they have to be copper and yours are PVC, so we can't do it." And I'm like, "What? The other meter was hooked up to the PVC pipes. It was not a problem." He said, "Well, we can't do it." And I'm like, "Okay." Of course, this is like a Friday evening, so I'm like, "Okay, I'll get some..." I called the landlord, she's like, "I'll send somebody right out there." Literally, this guy got here in like 15 minutes, but it was [air quotes] "too late" for them to go on and connect the service, which meant that once the pipes were in, all they had to do was take the key and turn it, but it was too late. So they were like, "Well, we'll be back out Monday." So, I go another weekend, and I get out Monday, and they come, and they turn my water back on, and I pay my 150 dollars. I pay 150 dollars the next month. So, I pay 150 dollars for...for August, and I pay 150 dollars for September. And then in September, I get a bill from Ju--from May 12 to July 14 for service, for usage, for sewa--sewerage. My water was cut off that whole time, but I got a bill for it.

So, I went down there, and I was complaining, and then I saw the debauchery that goes on at the Water Department. So, they had us lined up outside along the wall like we're waiting to get government cheese, and they were so rude and so disrespectful and because people had started going in there--which I can understand--people going in there angry, they had security, armed security, now at the Water Department. And you had to go through a metal detector because people were co--I guess people were coming in like, "I'm gonna cut somebody because they cut my water off," you know. And this security guard was so rude. It was an elderly lady. She--it was hot as hell, she had oxygen, and she had one of those little carts she can push and then take her top--you know, sit on it? And she was standing up there, and she was so exhausted, and her son was like, "Go back to the car. It's too hot. I'll stand up here for you." He told him, "You can't stand up here for her. Is the bill in your name?" He said, "No, it's in my mother's name." He said, "She has to stand up here." And so, they got into like a little tiff, and he was like, "I'll have you arrested. I'm, you know, a retired"--not a retired--"I'm an off-duty DPD [Detroit Police Department], but I can still arrest you." You know. And so, he's...his mother's like, "Just go back. I'll be okay."

So people in line started saying, "Just let her go in front of us."--'cause you had to pull numbers--and we're like, "Let her go in front of us." So, we got her in front of us, and he's like...then, she's like, "Well, I have to use the restroom." He would not let her in to use the restroom. He said, "It's a trailer back in our parking lot where you had to go get your number and then come stand outside." He said, "You can walk back there and go to the bathroom, but you'll have to pull another number. You can't get back in line." And that's, like, how they treated people at the Water Department. So, I just started like videotaping it with my phone, like, oh, okay, that could not be my mother, you know, 'cause I would be imprisoned. And I mean, just like... He was...everybody was just...the whole line was arguing with this man, and he just loved it. He was just like... They were like, "You're gonna go to hell for that. You got a mother, too. If your mother's still living, somebody's gonna dog your mother." And he was just like, "I don't care. I'm doing my job. I don't care. You can shut up. Keep talking. I'm gonna let you in, too." That's just like the mentality, like they have full control of everything.

And I got in there, was talking about disputing my bill, and this is when I discovered that if you're a corporate client or commercial client and your bill is unusual, you can [claps hands] dispute it immediately. No matter how far back it went, you can dispute it. But because you're a resident, when I got in--and because this was from May 12 to June 14 and it's now September, I was not allowed to dispute those charges and file a dispute because you can only file a dispute on your current amount if you're a resident. So I'm like, okay, so now I got this. This is gonna be tacked on to my bill, so this is more rearages. And so then, I received a letter in the mail telling me that my services were going to be cut off again.

[0:40:26]

So by now, this is October, and the United Nations rapporteurs had come in because we--Michigan Welfare Rights had been, like, connecting with them, and they considered it a human--they came in. They viewed the city. They saw what was going on, and we had this big meeting at Michigan Welfare Rights and then we had a town hall meeting for the public at WC3D [Wayne County Community

College District] downtown, and they had just cut my water off again like two weeks before the...the rapporteurs got here, and I was so sick.

When I say I was sick, like I never--I heard people talk about delirium. I had never experienced it before. I experienced it. So, I'm at the meeting, and I can barely keep my head up. I'm feverish, and we're like talking, and they're having people tell their stories, and they're like, "Well, you need to definitely be at the town hall." And I'm thinking in the back of my head, "I might not make it through tonight, you know, but I...I'll try." So, I go to the town hall meeting, and I didn't tell Michigan Welfare Rights or anybody that my water was cut off again 'cause I was embarrassed. Like, I...I just got my water back on, and it's cut off again! And so, I went to the meeting, and I remember being at the meeting, and they had John Conyers there, and I was talking, and I was telling my story, and people were just like, "Ahhhh! What?" You know, people were like so shocked because I think I was one of the first people that actually had children and their water was cut off and I would speak up because people had this fear that their kids were gonna be taken. And I'm like, they're not taking my kids. I had already established that. I had went and got the CPO [Civil Protection Order]. They're not taking my kids, you know. And so, I was speaking, and I remember, like, I was speaking but I was there, but I wasn't there.

And I...I got home that evening, and I was sitting up. I literally couldn't lay down, like, when I say I was so congested and feverish, and I sat there, and I was like okay. I woke up at like three o'clock in the morning. I was cold, but I was hot, didn't know what was going on. I was like, I can't do it. I gotta go to the hospital. So, I went to the emergency room, and they of course asked me had I been out of the country because they had this Ebola thing going on. And I'm like, "No, I haven't." And then, they had something going around called the Enterovirus, which a lot of kids were getting. They were dying from it, and I worked at a school at the time, so they were like, "You may have this. We don't know what's going on with you. Your temperature's like 106." They immediately put me in a room, packed me in ice--didn't help with the chills, but they were trying to get my fever down--and they quarantined me in my room. Everybody came in my room with HazMat suits on 'cause they didn't know what was wrong with me. They just knew I obviously had some type of infection because my temperature was so elevated that I had to have some type of infection in my system. So, they just started running a battery of tests.

They didn't know what I had, and my mom used to be a nurse, so one of the nurses on staff was probably like 150 years old that knew my mom was like, "Hey, baby! You know, I didn't know you were here. What's going on?" And I'm just like, "I don't know. They just... I'm in here. I'mma die. I'm dy..." I'm thinking I'm dying. I mean, people have on HazMat suits. I'm dying! And she was talking to me, and I confided in her that my water was off. And she--I was like, "But, I don't want nobody to know because they might take my kids," and she kinda like talked to one of the doctors and was like, "Maybe, you know, you should be looking for some of these things that could be water-borne or bacteria that could be caused by not having, you know, proper hygienic, you know, surroundings." And they found out that I had bacterial pneumonia, and they... I had to stay in the hospital for two weeks on antibiotics, and while I was in the hospital, somehow Miss [Alice] Jennings and Sylvia [Orduño] and some--I remember Mama Lila [Cabbil]--found out that my water was off again, and I remember Miss Jennings calling me after I got coherent and could actually speak in English again that she was like, "I can't let you go in back to that house with no water." And I'm like, "Well..." She was like, "Don't worry. Me and Lila are gonna go down there and figure out what's going on. This doesn't make any sense." And I know in my heart--they'll never admit it. Mama Lila took it to the grave--that they paid my water bill so my water could get turned back on. And I eventually ended up going home on like a whole lot of medication, and I had to follow up with the doctor. And the doctor told me that since my bacterial pneumonia was so bad, like, my lungs are pretty much compromised for the rest of my life. So, that was my parting gift from the Water Department.

[0:45:53]

And even then, they still have yet to admit all the errors, so me being that I'm always...let's just say investigatory. We're not gonna say nosy. I started digging into things myself, [coughs] and...and I discovered so many errors. The first error I discovered was that an address that I had lived at and moved from in 2009, when I moved, they--I called the water department, and they said, "Well, you have to have a zero balance to transfer."--[coughs] Excuse me. [Drinks water] Okay.--So, you have to have a zero balance to transfer your account from one address to another, and because they've had these issues where at one point in time, if you

were a renter, the water was automatically included in the rent, [coughs] and property owners found that people were using tremendous amounts of water because they didn't have to pay it. So now, they give the property owner a choice. Either they can pay it, or they can fill an affidavit out for the tenant to pay it. So, if you fill out an affidavit, it has to be on file with the Water Department within one week of you moving into the property.

So being that I did all of this... [coughs] Mmm. Excuse me. Being that I did all of this, you would think I would have no issue. So, I did all of that. It was all filed, the water was onto my address. I was paying my bill every month. Someone has decided to squat in the house that I moved out of--this is a really weird story. This is like some Twilight Zone stuff.--So, this is how I found out someone was squatting in the house. So, my daughter was going to school. Her and my niece went to the same school. They befriended a girl at the school who had just started there. One day I picked 'em up. I was dropping my niece off who lived like about a mile away, and the girl said, "Well, I live that way. Would you mind dropping me off at home too?" So I'm like, "Sure. No problem. I got to go that way anyway." I'm driving, and she's like, "Right here. Turn, make a left here." And I'm like, "I used to live on this street. Okay." I'm driving. She's like, "Right here." And I'm like, "Oh my God, this is my house."

That's how I found out people were squatting in my house. She pulled--I drop her off at the house. The front door is open. Everything else is boarded up, all the windows, everything. So, I'm like, "Mmmm." I thought about that, I went back and checked, and I'm like, okay, these people are living in the house. They been in the house since August of 2009. I moved in July of 2009. The Water Department told me that they don't cut water off to an address. They just take it out of the tenant's name and put it back in the property owner's name because if they don't have anybody in the house, they don't want the pipes to freeze over the wintertime. I understand that. So, that's what they supposedly did, but apparently, they just decided to leave it in my name, and all of this was just being billed to me, and so they just combined it. So, every time I was thinking I'm paying my water bill, of course being that this bill is older, they're taking that money and putting it on that bill, and these people are just over there living lavish. I mean, this girl was calling me telling me they were having water fights in the street. Can my kids come over, and you know, thinking--which, she was a kid. She was just thinking, like, "I want my friends to come play with me too. We--my mom bought me a pool. We're

filling it up in the backyard.” And I’m thinking like, “They using my water though,” you know. And so, you know, of course I let my kids go. I was like drink, eat as much as you want when you’re over there, yeah.

And even though I brought all of this to the Water Department’s attention, they still will refuse to address it. I found out also that there was an account in my name on the East Side of Detroit, which I’ve never lived on. And actually, Maureen Taylor found that out. She was investigating to try to find out, like, about this addr--the address that I had current...currently moved from and discovered another address popped up with my name attached to it, too, so. There’s a lot of things that were going on, and the Water Department didn’t address it, and we still don’t know if that meter was defective because they never gave the results on that. So, that’s kind of how they function.

And like, sadly, I had to do all of this myself. My second degree happens to be in homeland security and emergency management, which helped me be able to do that because I’ve taken all of these criminal justice courses. The average person may not, so how are they gonna know how to investigate for themselves and if it’ll do any good? Which it didn’t, because I ended up having to file bankruptcy to get the bill off of my credit because it just was sitting there. It was like this 5,700 dollar water bill just sitting there, so. They never addressed it. They never offered any reparation, and literally one lady that worked at the Department--which I’m pretty sure if they found out what she did, they fired her--she went through my whole bill after I brought this to the attention of the Water Department. She was the only one that responded, and she’s like, “They actually owe you about 2,200 dollars.” And she’s like, “I don’t know which avenue. I’m just a customer service rep. I was just going through it when you, you know, you brought it to our attention. Like but, I don’t know what your next step would be because apparently we’re having issues with, you know, the management. So, but I just wanted you to know that somebody here values doing their job.”

[0:52:18]

And to this day, that’s never happened. And it’s not even about the 2,200 dollars! Just why would you...why did I have to go through so much to show you that you

were inaccurate? It shouldn't be that way. Now, I know that may not be the case with everyone, but my thing is you shut off, at the height of the shutoffs, you shut off almost 200,000 people. How many of those people really shouldn't have been shut off? None of them should have been shut off, but I'm saying, how many really had no fault in the shutoff at all? They were trying to pay their bills despite you constantly going up on the rates, you know, and we really haven't gotten a lot of the faith support that we should. We've gotten a lot of pastors on board, but like the Council of Black Baptist Pastors has not gotten on board because they had a deal with the city for the drainage fees, and they got money from their lawsuit for it. So, my thing is is that's great that you did, and I understand the drainage fees affect churches, but how dare you sit here and worry about the church when you have a church full of parishioners that can't pay their water bills? And the only thing you're concerned about is the lawsuit you got for your drainage fee, so now that you have this drainage fee and you got the lawsuit, you can't get involved because you...you signed paperwork saying that you wouldn't do that if you got your payment.

So it's just like, you know, it's a lot of people that should be involved that aren't, and the thing is is that I don't think it's gonna get any better with Gary Brown running the Water Department at all. I mean, first of all, I don't know why they had him running anything. I mean, and let's...let's just take a look at what he ran before. DPD [Detroit Police Department]. Now, let's just look at how Detroit police officers work in the city. Detroit police officers--no offense, I love and respect law enforcement, okay. They're no more than glorified meter maids because if you call them and someone's breaking into your house, they won't even show up. They show up for gun fights, and they show up to write tickets. That's what they do. And I actually had an officer tell me that--you know, 'cause he came out like two days after my house got broken into, and I'm like, I remember talking on the phone, and I was telling people like, "If you don't get here, I'mma, you know, I'mma shoot this person 'cause I'm outside and I see this person in my house." And they're like, "Well, ma'am, if you shoot him, you're gonna go to jail." So, I'm gonna go to jail for defending my home and my property, but you're not gonna show up.

And they showed up two days later, and the officer told me, he said. I said, "What happened to serve and protect?" He said, "We don't have to serve and protect anymore." He said, "Our job is to apprehend people, and that's it." Like,



we're...we... What do you mean, protect? Like, you don't... Like, when I grew up, like, police officers rode around the neighborhood and were like, "Hey, kid. What you doing?" You know. "I... You're...you're up to no good." Police don't do that anymore. The only purpose they do now is to harass people. That's their main goal right now. My son can be walking to a job because he works a lot of stuff around the neighborhood. He tries to help a lot of the older people in the neighborhood. They'll stop him on the corner, harass him, ask him what he's doing 'cause he's a young Black male, but if you see somebody's house getting broken into, you don't do anything. Like so, what do you get paid--and then you wonder why you're some of the lowest-paid officers in the country! That could have something to do with it. But down here and going down Detroit, you see more police down here than you see in the entire community everywhere else. Like, I...I see Dearborn [Michigan] police more than I see Detroit police in my neighborhood. And they actually are doing--they stop by, "Hey, how you doing? I'm Officer So-and-so." "Oh, is there a problem, Officer?" "Nope, I'm just riding through here, observing any...making sure everything's straight." You know, like, you don't see that with? How are you doing that? This isn't Dearborn, I'm in Detroit! I mean, I'm on the cusp, but still, why is Detroit not doing these same things? You know. And we're not even talk about what some of the officers did on social media, like that was just ughh, you know.

And I think that like just seeing that and knowing how officers act, you see Gary Brown was running them, why would you let him run anything else? Like he--and...and he knows nothing about public utilities. That's the thing. Like, he doesn't...he didn't know that we owned the Water Department. We were the only city in the country that owned their Water Department. That's why it was called the Detroit Department of Water and Sewerage and not the Wayne County Department of Water and Sewerage. Most other metropolitan cities, either the state or the...the county owns it. We owned it because taxpayers created it, you know, and just like I have to do that everytime I speak, especially when I speak to suburbanites, because the first thing out their mouths is like, "Oh, so people in Detroit don't pay their bills, and now our bills are going up." Honey, your bills were going up anyway. Let me tell you. I'll use--I love Ferndale [Michigan]. I do. Use them as an example. They buy water from us for wholesale, and then they mark it up a thousand percent before they pass it on to their residents. And this is the kicker! Detroit gets nothing from that because you bought it wholesale! So we...it's not like we get a portion of that! And then, we have to...

Then, they say they should not have to help us pay for infrastructure. But if you think about the infrastructure that was created for the city initially, and then we now have a--what?--129 municipalities and townships that utilize that infrastructure because they're on Detroit water, but they don't have to pay for infrastructure fees or sewerage. Like, the suburbs gets water. They don't pay for sewerage. They just pay for water. So, we pay the sewerage costs. And like, my cousin lives in Ferndale. She still gets a bill every three months. We get a bill every single month now. I'm still getting a bill. I don't even pay water anymore. Where I live at, the landlord pays the water, but I'm still getting a bill from my old address for 258 dollars because, once again, after I moved and let them know, they didn't turn it off and when a new tenant moved in, for two months she just didn't worry about the water bill. So, she was just using the water that was on there. And so, every month I get a bill, like, you owe us 248. It's the same bill for the same period, and I get it every month, and I just look at it, and I put it right in the garbage, like mmm-nnn. Nope. Give me my, you know, 650 credit rating back, then I'll pay the bill. They're not gonna do it though, so it's okay. I'll rebuild my credit, and you'll still be hounding me for that 258 dollars. Oh, I'm sorry, I just...

**OY:** No, it's okay. [laughs]

**NH:** Go ahead. You got questions. Told you I'd go off on a tangent sometimes, especially about this 'cause it's like my Achilles' heel.

**OY:** That's fine.

**PB:** Do you need to take a break or anything?

**NH:** Nope, I'm good.

[1:00:18]

**OY:** What or who have been some of the greatest influences on your organizing work?

**NH:** Ooooooh. Definitely Mama Lila, or Lila Cabbil, because I always told her I was a work in progress 'cause like I'm not that far away from that line that crosses to be like I'll punch you in the face, and she's like, "Always wage love." That's what she taught me. Always. Like, you might be biting a hole in your lip while you do it, but wage love. And a lot of times, things probably could have escalated, but I remembered what she said, and I think that deescalated it. So, she was definitely a big influence, and then she just... It wasn't just about the water. Like, she just influenced me about just everyday things, about being proud of your culture, about racism. And you know, she always used to tell me, she said, "It's always been racism. Racism hasn't went away. It's just more covert up here than it's...it is in the South. That's the only difference."

And I'd say, and I'd fi...and seeing that I've lived in both areas, it is more covert up here. Like people will...there are people up here that are racist that will rub your back and make you think they're your best friend, and they can't stand you, but you serve a purpose for them. And down South, they're just like, "I don't like you. I don't like Black people. I don't. Sorry, but I don't." They're just like more honest about it, which is not always the best thing either because, you know, you might say, "I don't like Black people," to the wrong person and get beat up, you know. Just like that lady on the video that was in the hotel and was making racial comments, and the lady just like plowed her. And it was like, you're not gonna do that in front of me. You never know who will beat you up nowadays. Don't underestimate people.

So, I think she did teach me wage love. She taught me about racism. She definitely taught me how to stand up and...and...and speak in your voice. Don't worry about what they might want you to say or how they may want to say. Speak the truth and speak it from your heart. She taught me that.

Monica Lewis-Patrick, she taught me to be a strong Black queen. She did. She taught me like don't take guff off of nobody. You know, like if they giving you guff, you better guff right back at 'em, you know. Don't...don't let them make you ball

up. No. Stand strong, stay strong, and know who you are and realize who you are. So, she taught me that.

Maureen Taylor taught me how to fight because she's on that line, too, where she'll cross over, and she lets... She was clear to let me know, like, "I know what Lila said, but there's a time and a place to punch somebody in the face, too." So, she did teach me that.

Sylvia [Orduño] kind of taught me to be calm because I'm...I'm...when I...when I get riled up about something like it's really hard to get... Like, I'll go home and still be talking about like, "Uhhh!" You know. And she's like, "No. You have to calm, calm it down, and save that energy for when you're facing that battle." She taught me that, and I think Marian Kramer taught me to take care of myself, definitely. Her, her and Reverend Bill [Wylie-Kellermann], her and Reverend Bill both taught me that. Because we were...we were running with the People's Water Board, the Poor People's Campaign, and both of them did it in the midst of having injuries, and they both were telling me like, "It wouldn't have taken as long for me to heal and recover if I had stepped back and took care of myself. Don't be afraid to step back and let others step up while you're healing because if you're not in optimal performance, then you can't do the job that you're meant to do."

So, I'm trying to do that now 'cause I have like a pinched nerve in my back, so I'm trying not to, you know, get riled up and trying to go to therapy, and of course a couple people have threatened me, so I'm trying to do the right thing now. So, that was a hard lesson to learn because even as a parent, you're always like I got to stay active. I gotta do this, I gotta do that, and you really kind of always put yourself on the back burner. So, I'm learning now that it's okay sometimes to step back and say I got to come first, which was a hard lesson for me to learn. So, yeah.

[1:05:09]

**OY:** You spoke on this a little bit, but could you tell us about how emergency management and bankruptcy impacted the city?

**NH:** Huhhh...emergency management... Let's just start with that 'cause it's like three, four cities in particular that I want to bring up with emergency management. So, it's Detroit, Highland Park [Michigan], Flint [Michigan], and Benton Harbor [Michigan]. Emergency management, everything that you see that is going wrong with these cities, these four cities, is direct, a direct result of emergency management. With Detroit, Kevyn Orr... [sighs] They not gonna ever let me meet this man face-to-face, I already know that, 'cause that's when I'll cross that line and punch him in the face, real hard. I'll have all my rings on when I do it. Because for him to come in [clears throat] and take complete control of everything, pretty much took control away from the mayor, the city council. No one had control. We don't even want to talk about what control the citizens had 'cause they had nothing.

I don't understand how they would let one person take complete control of everything. Our federal government doesn't even do that. The President still has to work with Congress, so then you're gonna say this one man--who, ironically, they didn't thoroughly investigate because he had his hands in so many different pots to where the city, what went on with that bankruptcy and the water was a weave [laces hands together]. It was no one string. All the strings connected to something else. There was not like he just came in, I'm gonna clean this up. You had your firm have their hand in it. But you were supposed to be impartial, but your...your firm had their hand in things, and they benefit... All of this that went on, him and his firm and a few select others like Dan Gilbert benefitted from the bankruptcy and from the water shutoff. The water shutoffs were done because they...he told them that the Water Department would be a viable asset in the bankruptcy hearings, and to do that, it didn't have...it couldn't have debt attached to it. So, that's why they started a massive shutoff campaign.

But, here's my thing. You pay Homrich 5.7 million dollars the first time--first time!--to shut off water. Then, you went back and gave them another seven million dollars to continue shutoffs and demolitions. You could've took that 12 million dol--not even that 12--you could've took that 5.7 million, put it in a fund, had all the bills wiped out, and gave people opportunities to start fresh. Then, you would probably be able to observe who was really not paying their bills and not able to pay their bills. Because if the rates would have been decent and people would've had no arrearage attached to it, then you could see, like, okay. This

person seems like they're struggling. Because here's my thing: you...you can kind of figure out who's struggling. If your bill is 78 dollars, but you give them 75 or you give them 60, you just may not be able to come through with that last 10 or 12 dollars. But if your bill is 75 and you're like, pffuhh. And then the next month, it's 150, and you're like, pffuhh. You can kind of figure like maybe that person isn't even making an effort to pay their bill. And my thing is: just accept the damn affordability prob--plan. That's all you got to do, and that will wipe it out.

Roger Colton--excellent, excellent economist--drew this plan up, drafted it initially for Detroit as Ground Zero. Philadelphia [Pennsylvania] somehow ended up enacting it before Detroit did. Says if you're... No matter what your bill is, you shouldn't pay any more than three to five percent of your income towards your bill. [coughs; drinks water] So, my thing is is if you do that, regardless of whose income, you might make 10 dollars a month. You're paying three to five percent of that towards your water bill a month. I make 2,000 dollars a month. I'm still paying three to five percent of that towards water, whereas you may not in the past been able to afford your water bill, you now can. So there...therefore, you're going to pay it. The Water Department's going to get more revenue, and we won't have these issues of shutoff coming up. [slaps leg] They have not accepted it. [coughs] And I think he initially did it, drafted it in like 2010, and they haven't accepted it. At first, they were on the border of accepting it, but then Victor Mercado started embezzling money, and he got arrested, and then the Kwame [Kilpatrick] thing came up, and now their excuse is it would violate Bolt [v. City of Lansing] and Headlee [Amendment].

[whispers] Bullshit. Bullshit. I call bullshit. The thing is is that if you make it where everyone in the city can afford their bill, and then everybody in the city who was owned a home and couldn't afford their bill are no longer getting that bill wrapped onto their property taxes and foreclosing of their homes, it's a lot more difficult to gentrificate this city because then people who would...you could kick them out for that reason are now staying here because they can afford it, and you can't come in and gentrificate the neighborhood and then build all these fricking townhomes, lofts, and condos that start out at 260,000 dollars to purchase. So, it's not ironic. You know, think about it. Like, I remember when I was younger, and we came, we were staying up here for a while because my dad was kind of like crazy military, so we were always moving, and they had a campaign going to get parking spots made on the street so that people wouldn't have to be worrying about, oh,

you can't park here. You can't park here. Meter, meter, meter. They didn't...they...they voted it down. But now, you got all these bike lanes? Mmm. And scooters everywhere. I'm not sticking my credit card in a scooter. But all the people that are there trying to draw back in from the suburbs back here, that's what their interest. That's what they want.

[1:12:16]

No one asked when they were revitalizing even downtown what the citizens of Detroit wanted. We didn't want Little Caesars Arena because guess what? That was public school money that they used to build Little Caesars Arena. I don't even...my kids don't even go to public school. They get homeschooled. You want to know why? Because the last book my son brought home, they told him to do an African American history project. He was in the eighth grade. He wrote about Marcus Garvey. You know what they told him? You can't turn that project in because that's not in the book. You have to write about who's in the book, and the book was the same book that his older brother had in eighth grade, and his older brother's 32. Why has not the book been updated? My daughter had an American history book that had nothing about...the last President it had something about in it was Bill Clinton. How are these kids supposed to learn things, and they don't even have the adequate equipment to do that? And then people say, "Oh, don't put your kids in the charter school." The reason charter schools are getting all the students is not because they're better than Detroit Public Schools per se as far as education. It's because they have better tools. They have better equipment. That's why they're drawing people in 'cause the teachers are still...they still suck, but you suck with iPad. So, you know, the kids can keep up with what's going on.

You know, this... It's so many things going wrong in Detroit that are drawing in the wrong type of people. Like, people wonder, like, why, like, the schools suck. Okay, I'm a schoolteacher. I got 60,000 dollars in student loans, but you tell me if I teach in a Detroit Public School for five years, you'll wipe out my student loans. Guess what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna teach here for five years, and then I'm going to Rochester Public Schools. That's what I'm doing 'cause they pay more, and it's a better school district. But, I'm gonna make sure that I go there debt-free. So, I'm gonna teach here, but I'm not gonna give it my all 'cause these kids don't want to learn anyway, and I'm just trying to get my student loans erased. We have a lot of

that happening. We have a lot of that happening, and it's all just all like one thing that's all connected tying in to the destruction of Detroit.

That's basically what's happening because my thing is why can't you fix these neighborhoods up for the people that are already in them? Why do I live in a district--I live in District 7. I'm the only district that doesn't have a community center in it. We don't. We--and we're also one of the largest districts, but I know other districts that are smaller, and they have three and four community centers in it. My kids have the Boys and Girls' Club, which is--how can I put this nicely? Hmm. I can't--it's the ghettoest place in the world. It's the most ghetto place. You go in there to sign your kids up for some extracurricular activities. People are sitting on the counter on Snapchat, their butts on the counter. You try to find out who's in charge. They in the corner trying to flirt with some girl that look like you bordering on being R Kelly. I mean like, no, my children aren't about to go there! So then people say, "Oh well, you're uppity. You don't care about the city," 'cause I send my kids to a community center in Dearborn.

It's...but...but people wouldn't have to do that if you gave people in this city the quality of things that they deserve and that they want, starting with the school system, starting with the water. We not gonna even get on DTE today 'cause that's a whole entirely different interview, but like, at the same time, it's like even when you look at emergency management how they did. It didn't stop with emergency management. The same thing they did with emergency management they're damn near doing with Dan Gilbert. As far as...as long as--I am 46 years old, okay. As long as I've known it, you could always go straight down Woodward to Hart Plaza, but now you can't because Dan Gilbert blocked it off so his people could have the little playground area for his Quicken Loans employees--who are really getting worked as slaves, by the way, but they don't, you know, they get paid well, so they're thinking about the money. So like, you...you give a private citizen the power to block traffic off? Not for an event, but permanently? And set up a...a...a porch swing down there? That's what you give private...private citizens the power to do?

But you know what, when I was your roommate in college, we already talked about this, we're buddy-buddy. So, I'm your roommate in college. I got kicked out for running a casino out of our dorm room. You continue, so I went to another



college, but we're still buddy-buddy 'cause we're cool. So now, you're the mayor, and I want to come and gentrificate your city. You're all for it 'cause we're homies! That's pretty much what's going on. See, Dan Gilbert doesn't think anybody investigates him. I stay up late nights on the dark web doing a lot of stuff. Yeah, I do. But like, who does that? Nope, I mean, it's...it's not like it was the governor that wanted to block the street off. This is Dan Gilbert. I own Quicken Loans and Rocket Loans and, you know, CompuServe, and, you know, I tried to own some teams but apparently... I mean, Ohio doesn't even want to admit they know Dan Gilbert, but he's here doing what he wants because the mayor's his home boy. So like, as long as we have like people using their personal relationships for business purposes and for political purposes, it's gonna continue.

Because my thing is he has too much control to be a private citizen. I even... I mean, I think it was maybe like about four months ago, we had a People's Water meeting, Water Board meeting, and you know his new area to...to gentrify is Brightmoor [Michigan]. So, what he's doing is his private security rides along with Water Department workers when they go to cut your water off, and the mayor has either inadvertently--let's just say inadvertently 'cause he won't admit it. Me and Mike [Duggan], another story--that if they go to cut your water off, his private security is riding behind the water truck with CPS [Child Protective Services] in the car and taking your kids right there on the spot. Why is that his decision to make? He's a private citizen. Granted, he doesn't pay taxes or nothing like we do, [slaps legs] you know, but [slaps legs] he's supposed to be a private citizen, just a rich private citizen. Like, no person that is not in that line of work should have that control to make that decision. Now, if CPS want to...wants to ride with DPD along with Water Department shutoffs to see if they...there are kids in the home, that's between the State of Michigan and the City of Detroit. It should not have any private citizen's name in there whatsoever.

But because he does this, it's like the mayor just, I don't know. I don't know where the mayor's balls are really though. I think he just lost them, and Dan Gilbert has them in his back pocket. That's what I think because I grew up in the generation of Coleman Young and would none of this would have been going on with Coleman Young, at all. I venture to say it might not even have been going on with Dennis Archer. I'm not sure about Kwame [Kilpatrick]. Kwame was a little...narcissistic.

**PB:** Coleman Young cared about his people. He was one of them.

**NH:** He did. Coleman Young cared about his people--and I'm not... Don't get me wrong. Coleman Young did some like gangster, underhanded practices, but it was for the benefit of his people. It wasn't like I'm just gonna do some underhanded stuff just to try to destroy the community. Like, he'd a been trying to gentrificate the suburbs if anything. He wasn't gent...like he...he woulda been like, "I don't care if no white people ever come back to the city of Detroit." He would. He...that...that's his mentality. He woulda been like, "This is our city. We're gonna build it up. We're gonna do this. We're gonna do that." Now, we have Mayor Duggan, who I don't even think he's a human being, so. I think he's a shadow person 'cause I mean he don't have a soul. I'm just saying. Like, when he dies it's gonna be all kind of hell. All kind. And you know, if they would let me get in a room with him alone, it'd be all kind of hell now, but they won't.

You know, because just to...just to frame his state of mind about the city. So, we had a mayor's meeting supposed to be public comments. First of all, he didn't want anybody to make comments. Then, the few people that he did allow, I guess he thought they were gonna make comments to his benefit. I happened to be one of 'em, and I asked him. I said, "So, what are you gonna do about all the massive shutoffs that are going on?" His response to that was not "We need to stop the shutoffs" or even if he would have disagreed and said, "Well, these are people that don't pay their bills." His answer was, "We have 'em under a thousand." Like, as if you got 999 shutoffs and that makes it okay, you know. That's...that's your response. No we're trying to stop the shutoffs, we're trying to work through it. Nothing positive.

So, he doesn't like me, and I can't have a conversation with Gary Brown because when I come in the room he starts trying to hide. So, that's kind of hard to have a conversation with him. I don't know. I could have maybe sort of been a little disrespectful. I don't know 'cause I...I don't think I'm disrespectful. I think I'm just common because I don't go up and go, "Hi, Mayor Duggan." I go, "Hey, Mike," because, to me, you're not doing your job as an official that's running the city, so

I'm not gonna speak to you like you should be your honor, the mayor, 'cause you're not, you're Mike. He's Gary. He's not doing his job as the director of the Water Department because he still doesn't even know how many people have been shut off, and you're running the Water Department. I just like, they need to just get some monkeys. They need to get some monkeys. Just let 'em do it. That's it. Because they got monkeys running it. You need to get the smart monkeys. So, you know, that's just...it's...it's very frustrating. I try to be comedic about it sometimes 'cause you know it keeps me from like going rogue and just shooting up stuff, you know, so. But like, they really need to...they need to get some people in positions in the city that care about the city.

And it's like, a lot of people are against the city council. And it's some snakes on there, too, don't get me wrong, but what people need to realize about the city council is now they're trying to clean up the mess that emergency management left. So, even if everybody on the city council was all for the city, they have to clean up this huge mess that Kevyn Orr and everyone else involved with him left, and that's gonna be like the Exxon Valdez spill to clean up. It's just phhhh. We might be talking about this for years to come, and it could be all over with and resolved, we're still gonna be talking like, "Remember that time back when, you know, the city council just had to do this, this, this, and that? Because this is a catastrophic mess that's going on." I just, I don't know where this is gonna end or if it's gonna end well, and I kinda think that a lot of it is continuing because it's a trickle-down effect because look who's running the country. We have [Donald] Trump running the country. Then we get down here. We just got under the regime of [Rick] Snyder, and then you go down and we still got [Mike] Duggan, and then we go down to people and we got like Gary Brown and Gerry Anderson that's running DTE, and it's just like...

They just need to just do a complete, like, slate cleaning, just from the top to the bottom. We got [Gretchen] Whitmer--I'm still...the jury's out on her--and then we need to just continue on. We need a new mayor. We need a new city council. We need a new head of our department. We need a new head of utilities. Somebody needs to put some fire under the butts of everybody on the M...MPSC [Michigan Public Service Commission] and the--what is it the ED...I forgot what it is. It used to be the Michigan Department...Michigan Department of Environmental Quality. Somebody needs to...to put some fire under them, and it's so funny because working with DTE, DTE is [air quotes] "regulated" by the Michigan Public Service

Commission because it's a utility. Why is there no state regulation over the Water Department? I wonder that because maybe if it was, the city wouldn't be doing as much as they were doing, especially since Great Lakes Water Authority now has the Water Department. They might as well let the state run it because they've taken it away from the city already.

I mean, I'd rather have Whitmer and her team running than have L. Brooks Patterson involved because oh my God. He's trying to blanket Detroit. He even said it in New Yorker that he should...you should blanket the whole city like the Indians like they did. So I'm like, so you just want everybody to be pretty much get a plague on Detroit and, you know, kill off all the citizens. That's kind of like what he's hoping for, you know, and he's like, "I told my kids they don't even have to go through Detroit for anything except to get to the western Wayne suburbs." So, like that--and now he's having more power due to the Great Lakes Water Authority, and they've actually taken the power out of our hands because initially it was all Detroit covered, and then we had one representative from Wayne...oh, I mean, one representative from Macomb [County, Michigan], Oakland [County, Michigan], and I think Washtenaw County. And now, we have two representatives from the city, and all of the other representatives are from the other counties. So we're now outnumbered in the department that we built and we owned and we still have to pay for all the infrastructure for, but they get to make all the decisions on it. So, that's what they're doing.

[1:27:39]

**PB:** I got two questions I want to ask you.

**NH:** Yeah.

**PB:** I'm trying to figure out which one makes more sense to ask first. I'm gonna ask this one...

**NH:** [sniffles]

**PB:** ...about Duggan, about Mike Duggan.

**NH:** Mmhm.

**PB:** He still, like, wants to take credit for, like, every moratorium on water shutoffs in, like, 2014...

**NH:** Mmhm.

**PB:** ...in the midst of, like, the UN [United Nations] and everybody, like, coming in.

**NH:** [sniffs]

**PB:** Tell us the real story about why he was forced to do that.

**NH:** So, first of all, we were forced into mediations with Judge [Phillip] Shefferly, and they kept going back and forth. They had us in a room, separate rooms, and they would bring us together, and they were shooting down everything we were saying, the Water Depart--'they' being the Water Department--and Judge Shefferly basically told us, like, the only reason the Water Department is here is because they were ordered to be here. They really don't care about what you're saying, but Judge Shefferly kept going back telling the Water Department directors like, basically like, this looks really bad to the entire country. Detroit is Ground Zero. This looks really bad, like this is the...the United Nations is considered it's a human rights violation, and let's just be honest. A human rights violation does not look good when you're running again to be the mayor.

So, personally, I think the moratorium, it was two reasons. One, Mayor Duggan tried to make it seem like, oh, we're doing this moratorium on shutoffs. It was

because you were up for re-election, first of all. And secondly, they do a moratorium through the wintertime anyway to protect their own pipes, and it just coincided right along with that 'cause this was in October when the United Nations came. He did the moratorium pretty much through the winter, which they were gonna do anyway. So it's like, you took credit for something that you were gonna do anyway just to make it look good polit--in the political eye. That was the real reason behind it, like, if this woulda been, like, the summer, he wouldn't have did a moratorium. He would have continued with shutoffs. He didn't want his workers out there in the wintertime either, and so it was just all about for their benefit, for the city's benefit. It had nothing to do with them caring about the citizens in wanting to do a...a moratorium because we had been asking for a moratorium that whole time, and he never agreed to it until it got to winter because it's like, okay. Well, I already got to do it anyway, but this'll look good for me.

So, it was all like a tactic, a propaganda tactic, to make sure that he got elected into office. Just like that summer that my water got cut off, he was driv--going all around the city making personal appearances, cleaning up all the parks, putting tulips in it and everything, and making 'em all old people friendly, you know, 'cause you know, old people don't want all those monkey things, they just want to go sit on the little bench and look at the flowers, and he was making all the parks all nice and everything and trying to draw all the kids in the community, giving 'em hot dogs--They probably weren't even turkey or beef. They were probably meat hot dogs. They were probably high grade 'cause they weren't even...they weren't good quality hot dogs. They weren't like Nathan's or anything, you know.--and giving 'em popcorn, and, you know, he'll never come in a neighborhood where my kids are again because my daughter just happened to be at the park that day, and she got the hot dog, and she said when her friends came running back like, "Mom! Mayor Duggan's at the park."

And I walk around there, and I see my daughter walking up to the mayor, and I'm just like, [covers eyes with hands]. And she goes up, and she says, "Hi, Mayor Duggan." And he said, "Would you like a hot dog and a juice and some, you know, popcorn or chips?" And she was like, "I'd like all of the above." And he gives 'em to her, and then she goes, "I have a question for you." And of course, you know, he's like, "Oh, this is so cute!" He has a little newscaster there and everything. I know they deleted the footage afterwards. She goes, "So, let me ask you this. Why are

you fixing up all these parks? What are you going to do about fixing up the rest of the city, and why do you keep cutting everybody's water off?" And...and she's like...he's like... [leans back with shocked look]

And then, she...he tries to de...defer her to Alexis Wiley--which Alexis Wiley doesn't like us either because we call her Alexis. And I'm like, get... Every time I try to talk to the mayor, she tries to stop me, and I'm like, "I'm not here to talk to you, Alexis. Move. I want to talk to Mike." And he...she's just like, [slaps legs], [raises hands in shrug gesture] [slaps legs]. I'm like, "I'll punch you in the face. Get out. Move, Alexis." And then, she'll move, you know. And then, I'll go talk to the mayor or attempt to. And so, like, she already knew. I think she probably had a psychic moment like, "This is her daughter," you know. So, we're like, my daughter want to talk. She was like, "I don't want to talk to you. I was trying to ask him a question." And I'm like, "Okay." And then, I get up there, and I'm like, "Come on, baby." And she, she gives me a side eye look like, "Figures that's your daughter," you know. And I'm like, "She'll punch you in the face, too." And, you've seen my younger daughter. She's pretty tall for her age. She can...she can do it, you know.

So, I think like, yeah, he just...I think he probably monitors my family. I think so. I know he monitor--no, seriously! Like, at one point in time, some of the People's Water Board did believe that they had drones or something monitoring us because they would like know where we were gonna be at 'cause we were doing like...like protests in front of the Water Department, and we would go during the summer. We would protest in front of the Water Department and then walk from... We would start at Campus Martius and complain about Dan Gilbert and then walk over to the Water Department and set up in front of the Water Department and, you know, just let people know what's going on and like we wouldn't even take the same route all the time. And like, sometimes we would look up, and there would be like Detroit police. Like how? Hmm... How they know where we were? We didn't even show up all, you know, like walk here together. Like what? You know. And so, I... They, you know, they have their conspiracy theories. I wouldn't put it past the Water Department or the city of Detroit, you know, to...to monitor what private citizens are doing, especially when they're being so outspoken against them. So, yeah. I hope they just don't be looking at my house, so they might see something they don't want to see 'cause my kids are in there clowning. So, yeah.

[1:34:29]

But I just...I think... I wish more citizens would get involved. Like, it... Your water doesn't have to be off for you to get involved because that's what I always try to tell people, like you...people were like, "Well, I..." I've literally like did, stood in front of Water Departments passing out information about what's going on, and people were like, "Oh no, my water's not off." And I'm like, "But somebody in your neighborhood's water might be off." "Oh well, that's their problem." And I'm like, "No, that's your problem too." And then, you know, I tell them why. And then, they get that frightened look on their face when I tell them like, "Well, since their water's off and it's sitting in the pipes getting stagnant, guess who's gonna get a healthy dose of bacteria when they turn it back on? 'Cause it's gonna flow right through the main pipe and come into all of your water. So, you're gonna be drinking that bacteria that was sitting in that pipe because that water was cut off, and it was just sitting stagnant right there, and it's gonna flow through." And then, they're like, "What? Oh my God. Well, what? Oh yeah, we do need water affordability." Oh, now we do.

You know, you got to think above the big picture. Like, if the rates are going up, just because you can pay your water bill now don't mean you gonna be able to pay your water bill in...in two years--or even a year, at the way they're going up with the rates, you know. I mean, you've heard, I'm pretty sure, some of the sta--stats. Like by 2035, they say like...like almost 40 percent of the United States won't be able to afford water, and that's shameful that anybody within Detroit cannot afford water when we sit on the Great Lakes and we sit on 21 percent of the world's fresh water. Not the country, not the city. The world. We have it right here, but we have people here that don't have water to drink.

And I think... I wonder when they shut it off. I've asked Water Department officials, and I've tri...attempted to ask Gary Brown--I think he has a touch of ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder] though--like do you stop and think when you cut water off--okay, I understand that, yeah, people have to bathe, da da da da. Have you just thought of the simplest: people need to drink water to survive? Your brain is 70 percent water. So, if you're dehydrated, what is it doing to your brain? And my thing is is I go through the whole medical spiel. People don't realize that by the



time you actually physically realize you're dehydrated, you've been dehydrated for a very long time before you actually get the dry throat, I'm feeling thirsty. You know, you get delirious. 'Cause people wake up all the time, and they're like, oh, I have a headache. 90 percent of the time, the reason you have a headache is because you need water, and it gives you a headache because your...your...everything is contracting so much and trying to pump that it gives you a headache. I know people that are like, "Oh, my head hurt, my stomach hurt." They drink a good two, three glasses of water, like, "I feel a little better." You were dehydrated, honey. "I didn't feel dehydrated." But, you were. You know. They...they have no answer for that, like when you ask questions like that, they want to, you know, wait and let them talk to a nurse and come back and talk to you. So, I just pull Sister Mary Ellen [Howard] in and be like, you can just ask her. She's a nurse. And they're like, "But she's with you." She's still a nurse. Ask her. You know, people just don't think about that.

And then, considering how they do the m--like how they do, like I was saying, with the moratorium. Most people are shut off when it's warmer. So, that makes it even more detrimental because they need water even more then. Like, everybody's like, oh, eight glasses a day. I been got over that. You're literally supposed to drink like half your body weight in water a day. You know, so like, I guess if you weigh, you know, 128 pounds, 64 ounces is good for you. But if you weigh more than that, you probably need more water than that. So, you know, I just try to go on and just drink the ocean every day, so. Yeah, yeah.

[1:38:49]

**PB:** I want to come back to the point you made about wishing that more people would get involved and get active...

**NH:** Mmhmm.

**PB:** ...even if they're not impacted.

**NH:** Mmhmm.

**PB:** And I think, like in...as far as like storytelling goes, ...

**NH:** [sniffles, drinks water]

**PB:** ...I think a really profound moment in somebody's story, particularly in their organizing, is about how they first decided like, fuck this, I'm gonna do something about it. So I...

**NH:** [sniffs]

**PB:** Could you walk us through like how you got involved with Michigan Welfare Rights, like what you were doing with them? 'Cause I think that like, I hear so often from folks that like...

**NH:** [sniffs; clears throat]

**PB:** ...people dealing with the water, like in a crisis situation, they've got kids, like there's so much going on, like they can't possibly get involved with things.

**NH:** Right.

**PB:** So like, how did you decide, like, I'm gonna fight for this?

**NH:** Well, initially, I got involved, like I saying before, because I was trying to compile a resource list because I saw people in my own community struggling with different things, and it wasn't even just the water. It was people couldn't pay their light bill, people couldn't pay, you know, this bill. People walking around,

their kids didn't have clothes and things like that. And I'm like, it's gotta be some organizations out there that can help because a lot of getting information is about, well, I call you, you refer me to him, he refers me to you, and it just keeps going. And it's like, somebody needs to go through all of this work and get to that final [claps hands] person that's gonna give you some action, and then add that name to the list. So, I had started doing that over the, like, maybe like a two-year period. Prior to that--so I had got involved that way.

And then of course, when I became impacted myself, I remembered the organizations and went back to it, and I got involved that way, and I think what kept me involved is that initially I got involved to get...receive services myself. But then, I kept thinking. Like, I got angry. Like, how dare them do this to people? And then, I kept thinking, like, who's gonna speak out for like the elderly people, the disabled people, you know, people who were scared that they were gonna lose their kids? Who's gonna speak out and stand up and say something and let their voice be heard, let people know, like, this is going on with these people particularly? It's not just a matter of I don't pay my bill. These are people that are...are most vulnerable, and nobody's standing up for them. Like I had...I was an only child my mother had. My dad was African. He had a whole bunch of kids. And I grew up with all my cousins, and I was like the oldest one, and my mom like kind of made me indirectly the toughest one because she was like, "You ain't got nobody to fight for you. You better learn how to fight," you know.

So I'm always, I think my whole life, been like looking out for other people, and I just kept thinking like somebody has to stand up and say something about this. And, I think you get like that aha moment like it...it doesn't have to be about me, but if I don't speak out and nobody else is speaking out, I'm not part of the solution, I'm part of the problem. And I don't want to be part of any problem, [laughs] I want to be part of the solution. So, I think that's what drew me to start speaking out, and I think that it's no excuse not to get involved because there are so many different ways you can get involved. Maybe you're not a person that goes out and do direct action or protest. Maybe you're not gonna come out and speak about your story. You don't...you're ashamed or you're hurt or you're afraid of the stigma, stigmatization, but can you sign a petition? Can you pass the information on to some... Can you take a flyer and pass it out to somebody else? Can you do something to get...? Always get a way to get involved. The thing is is what...what's comfortable for you. You may not be able to do what I do. Maybe you can come to

a meeting and hear and the information you get, you go back and tell one, and maybe the n--or you can tell somebody and bring somebody else to the next meeting. There's always something you can do. So.

[1:43:03]

**PB:** What are your strengths as an organizer? Like, of those things that you were just talking about, what, what are you best at? What are your roles?

**NH:** [laughs] I have no fear. I think that's what it is. I'm not scared because I'm like after going through that, and honestly, after going through [Hurricane] Katrina, it's like you can't do anything else to me. There's nothing else you can do to me. I lo--when I say I lost everything, like literally I had a duffel bag full of snacks and diapers. That's what I came up here with and the clothes on our back. You can't take anything else from me. I've been through the lost a job, I've been through the loss of material things, I've been through the, oh, I've never gotten the FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] check. I've been through the divorce. There's nothing else you can do to me besides end my life. That's it, and I know you don't have control over that anyway. So, what else can you do to me? I might as well speak out. So, I think that's...that's a strength. And then, obviously, I'm very talkative. You know, that's...that's a strength, you know. And I'm kinda cute, okay, [inaudible] [laughs] Yeah.

I think just like mainly though, just it ties between not having that fear and actually giving a damn about other people. That's what it boils down to. Like we're...we live in such a self-centered society now. Like, my mom used to call it--I didn't get it when I was younger, but I get it now. Like, she'd say... She used to tell me like certain friends have me-me syndrome. And I'd be like, "What?" And she was like, "All they think about is me, all they're worried about is me, and all they're looking out for is me. They have me-me syndrome." And, I've realized that there's a lot of people in this environment and in this society have me-me syndrome. Like just...it's like a...it's like a pulling nails, you know, out of a...a wall for them to even help someone else, you know, like. And, it's not always about finances. Just for someone to just be like, "Have a great day," that might help you. I don't know that, but did it kill me to say that? It didn't. But people are just like,

oh, it's all about me. What can I do? What is this? What's me? I don't care. It doesn't affect me, so I don't care. That's the mentality of a large portion of our society has, and it's why our society is slowly heading downhill. We're sliding off the mountain like California.

[1:45:39]

**PB:** You mentioned also the...kind of that role of people being able to tell their stories.

**NH:** Yeah.

**PB:** You've told some of these stories like a million times now, ...

**NH:** Yeah. Yeah.

**PB:** ...like, and I could ask you a million questions about that in terms of like what your experiences were like with the media and all that, but...

**NH:** Wasn't all good!

**PB:** I can imagine. But, I want to ask about the role of, like, storytelling in organizing work.

**NH:** Mhm.

**PB:** What...what, like, impacts does that have, like whether that's like what impacts does your own storytelling have or like what kind of...how does...what does...how... I guess, what does that do in organizing? What do...

**NH:** I think one of the important things it does is it makes a connection with other people, and it makes them ask questions. And also, it has a little bit of shock value 'cause people were like, "Oh my God, like I didn't know that was going on!" So, it brings awareness through that shock, but... And then, I've even found that just telling my story has encouraged other people to not be afraid to tell their story because it's like when they hear like, well, she has kids and she...she's speaking out, and she still has her kids, and I can speak out, too. So, I think it encourages people as well.

**PB:** Can you give us like--if you...if you're up for it--like a horror story from dealing with the media?

**NH:** Ahh, oh! Yeah, sure. So, Rush Limbaugh-- [laughs] enough said, huh? I guess my story... I think a lady from the New York Times had flew here and did my story, and she told me it was gonna be published and that she would notify me. And so, it was published in the paper and then digitally, and the digital publication, people, you know, could go on there and make comments. And like, first of all, I was kind of flattered. Like, wait a minute, Rush Limbaugh took the time to say something about me. And so, he had made a comment about like, "Well, maybe that's why her water is cut off. Who goes to school for homeland security? Like, she's just gonna be like patting people down in the airport or whatever." And he was like, "This woman just really just shows you how you waste government money, and, you know, maybe, you know, her out, maybe she deserves what's going on. Maybe she should concentrate on, focus on having a paying job so she can take..."--not knowing if I had any of those. That's the thing. And, I saw the comment, and some people were under there like, "What are you talking about?" Like, "He sounds crazy."

And so, I said, well, you know, "Hey, Rush. How you doing? I remember when you used to have a show on. You were a big mouth then, and you're a big mouth now." I said, "But let me tell you something about what I'm going to school for," and then I listed, like, a lot of the courses I had to take just to get into that program, and I said, "Oh, and by the way, that one, the emergency medical responder, taught me how to do things when people are in emergency situations. I hope your

ass doesn't have a heart attack walking through the [air quotes] "airport," and I have to save your life." You know, and people were like, "Yeah, get him! Cut into him." So, it was bad.

I think the...that outside of that, the worst things were like just comments people made 'cause--I don't know if you know Kate Levy? She did a lot of video work with me, and a lot of people were like, "Take her and her kids and just tie 'em up and throw 'em in the river." Or, one guy was like, "She should work out more, and she could sweat and feed her kids the sweat." And then that, like, that offended me more than anything 'cause it was like why are you bringing my kids into this? They're innocent. You can talk about me if you want to. Don't talk about my kids, you know. And, I did--the thing was is I wasn't able to like really make comments back to them because they, a lot of 'em, were anonymous. Like, I got some really dirty comments, but how...but, you know, with that...so that was like...the fact that there's another human being that would think that it would be okay to toss people in the Detroit River is just horrifying. Like, that's really what you think of people? Just toss 'em in the river? Like, I don't care, even if I came and found out your water was off, and you were like, "I went to the casino and didn't pay a bill," you know. I'm still not gonna be like, "Well, if you want water now, go jump in the river or go get thrown in the river." I mean, I would just have been like, "You might want to take a...a budget course," you know, something like that.

Like, and to think...to think that these people don't know me personally, so they don't know what led up to that or what I went through. They were just making comments based on what they think they know about what's going on with the Water Department because a lot of people try to make it seem like the Water Department is just an innocent entity, like they're just doing their job cutting people off, you know. They're not because they also have the ability to make the choice of not cutting people off, [drinks water] and they also have the ability to--which is in their instructions which they don't follow--that [coughs] they can ask a person, and they're supposed to come up to the door and ask the person and give them an opportunity to try to go down there and pay something or keep their water on. So when that was brought up, they went and made these door knockers that were supposed to let you know that you're seven days from your water being taken, cutting off. When I got cut off the second time, I got a door knocker at five PM the day they had already cut my water off in...in the morning. And the guy came out. I said, "Well, they already cut my water off, sweetie." And

he was like, "Oh sorry, but here's your doorknocker." So, [coughs] even things that...that was ordered by the court, they still didn't do 'em accurately, so. [drinks water]

[1:52:20]

**PB:** I'm really struck by the fact that you were impacted both by [Hurricane] Katrina and the water shutoffs.

**NH:** [sniffs] Mmm. Yeah.

**PB:** Like, you've been...you've...

**NH:** [sniffs]

**PB:** ...like borne witness to like some of the greatest, like, atrocities that the government...

**NH:** I know!

**PB:** ...has committed in the last, like, 20 years. Like, ...

**NH:** [sniffs]

**PB:** ...what... Being directly impacted by the lack of government intervention in both New Orleans [Louisiana]...

**NH:** Definitely.



**PB:** ...and in Detroit, what does that, like, what has that taught you or like made you feel about the governments that you live under?

**NH:** I don't feel like we live under a democracy. I feel like we live under a totalitarian society, almost an Orwellian type of society, and [coughs] those of us who are the least, well, we're just down there, struggle. If you make it, you make it. Only the strong survive, the weakest fall off. But, I think what they don't realize is that sometimes the people they deem the weakest are not actually the weakest. They just don't have the opportunities that they were given. Because right now, if this economy crashes, poor people are still gonna know how to make it 'cause they were already poor. They're just like, oh, add anup--another cup of water to the chili. We're gonna make it bean soup now, you know. And then, as you can see when we've had like stock market crashes, these rich people, they're like going home shooting up their wives and kids and jumping off the roof 'cause like they lost everything.

So, I think that our government definitely underestimates the actual power of their people, and I think if we got...if we really got more people to pull away from that narcissistic mentality, we could take our country back. That's what I think. Because right now--especially now--our country is not even ran by a dictator. I don't know what he thinks he is. I mean, I just, I don't know. Maybe he thinks he's God, I don't know. But, I know that one of the ways that I feel that we can change that is by using our actual power that we have in who gets elected. Like right now, for the first time, we have a wide variety of women in public office, and these are women that under normal circumstances would not get into office. They're Black women, they're women, Muslim women, they're Hispanic women, they're gay women.

Like, these are women that would normally would not make it in office, and now they're in, and so we have to--as citizens that are not in office--remind them you have responsibility to your citizens because it's no use of doing that with [Donald] Trump or with [Mike] Pence because I mean you can't get anything done talking to the table. The table is not gonna respond back. He doesn't know anything. He's a table! That's pretty much what Pence and Trump...Pence and Trump are like

inami--inanimate objects to me. I mean, what...what's... Talking to them does no good. Taking a sledge hammer and breaking it down, yeah, that might do some good, but like talking to Pence or Trump is doing no good. I don't even comprehend what Trump says 90 percent of the time, you know. I did learn some things because I didn't know that Puerto Rico was an island surrounded by big water. I thought it was a U.S. territory, my bad! I mean, you know, you learn something.

But I wouldn't waste my time talking to him, but I think we need to just make sure that the people we put in office are committed to doing our job because at the end of the day, they got in there because we voted 'em in--or we didn't vote 'em in, depending, because not voting is just as bad as voting the wrong way. You know, I knew when Trump was running, a lot of people were like, "I don't really like Hillary [Clinton], so I'm just not gonna vote." That's how Trump got in. Think about it. I don't care if I voted for Hillary or not, I wasn't gonna vote for Trump, but I wasn't gonna leave my vote uncounted either because I... Even if the person I didn't want to get in, I'm gonna let you know that I voted for this side. I definitely didn't want that thing in there, and I think a lot of people don't think like that. They think if the candidate that I want is not there, I'm just not gonna vote. Like if they got, you know, down to the wire and it's like, "Oh, I wanted Bernie [Sanders], but Hillary's running. I'm just not gonna say anything." You might as well just say I voted for Trump, then, because you helped him get into office.

Because people don't realize that. People are like, "Oh, my vote doesn't make a difference." Sometimes, it really comes down to that one or two votes that makes the difference. You don't know that. Even though, it's, you know, a big, you know, covert, you know--what's the word I'm looking for?--underhanded, you know, maniacal scheming process, it's still...I still would rather vote and have my vote counted to at least let it be known like, well, this is where I'm laying my stones at instead of just having me float like I don't know what you are, you know, what you stand for. Basically, like the old saying goes, I'd rather stand for something than to fall for anything.

[1:58:28]

**PB:** So having seen the worst--well, some of the worst--in government, what's--and this doesn't have to be restricted to government either, but like--what's...what's your vision for what the future of Detroit could look like that guides your work? What's the goal?

**NH:** [sighs] First of all, I think that Detroit on a lot of avenues is Ground Zero. So, I think we have a commitment as Detroiters to make sure that we instill the proper scenario because other cities are gonna be looking at us. So honestly, my goal would be for Detroit to have 100 percent renewable energy, to have a water affordability plan where everyone, not just those selected few, could be able to afford water and then show people how that plan works so it can be implemented across this country and in this--and...and in other countries because this is a crisis that's not just facing Detroit, but everybody's looking to see what Detroit's gonna do next.

So, I think that showing that we believe in protecting our environment and that we respect and honor our citizens that make the city run. Because think about it--and people say this with a lot of things, and I know it probably will never happen--but if all the Black people just got up and left Detroit, every Black person in Detroit, Detroit would still fall. It would still fall with all the people that have gentrified back here because, first of all, half these people that have gentrified back here are not gonna do the jobs that keep the city going. That's the first thing. And secondly, if a large portion of the people leave, the tax rates are gonna have to go up to keep funding the city, and they're not gonna want to pay that either because the whole reason...one of the main purposes of their moving back to the city is 'cause they get big tax breaks for doing it. Like, at one point in time, I seen an article--it was about two or three years ago--where they were giving people 10,000 dollar stipends to move back to the city, but people here that wanted to buy a home couldn't get the 10,000 dollar stipend. Why not? Buying a home is still buying a home. You're still getting your property tax no matter if I own it, you own it, she owns it. It doesn't matter.

So, I think I would like to see our city officials show more consideration to our citizens because the citizens of Detroit are far more intelligent than their city gives them cap--you know, the capability of having. [claps hands] We're able to do stuff like investigate the Water Department and, you know, find out what's going on

behind the mayor's black curtain or whatever he puts up when he's cheating, I don't know. [slaps legs] But like, I think just...just doing that and caring actually about the city because just caring about this few square miles downtown does not count as, you know, revitalizing Detroit. Slapping a tree in front of my house does not count as revitalizing Detroit when you put--they just had, what is it? I don't know if it's an acronym, but it's Asplundh [tree company] or whatever. That's what I call them, the tree people putting trees all down my street, but my grass is standing as tall as the new tree that they just put down there in the empty lots that are owned by the city right next to my house. So if you cared, when you put that tree there, you woulda cut that grass, too. Or you woulda said, well, make it a community garden. Or, put a house back there and let somebody move in it. Or, start ticketing people when the police literally drive down my side street and see people who don't live in that community throwing trash in abandoned areas. Make them ticket them.

But you ticket me for sitting in front of my house or pull up on me--literally happened two nights ago. I came home from work. My daughter had to go to work. I'm like, it's no use in me even going in the house and getting comfortable. I'm sitting in front of my house, blew my horn like, come on. She's taking her time. They pull up [slaps legs], "You just sitting, you've been sitting here for a minute." It's my house. Yes, I have. And that's exactly how I did it, [slaps leg] I went straight ghetto like, [slaps legs] "It's my house. Yes, I have. Do you have a problem with it?" "Ma'am, we're not trying to argue." Then, move along. And they're like, either she's crazy... No, I know my rights. I'm sitting in front of my house. I'm not disturbing the neighborhood. I'm waiting on my child. This is not a trap house. This is my home. And one of the officers just kinda looked like [shocked expression]... And then they pulled off, but like everybody may not know how to express themselves, or a lot of people don't know their rights.

So, I just think it's like a lot of avenues that need to be did to repair the city. One thing I think would be good is to now make it where change the rules back to when if you want to be an officer in the city of Detroit, you must reside in the city of Detroit because I think that makes a difference. I'm not gonna care if I'm a police officer in Southfield [Michigan] and when I go home I come to Detroit because it's not my city. But if it's my city, I'm gonna give a damn more about what goes on in my city. So I think that that, that makes a big difference.

[2:04:01]

**PB:** Is there anything that we've missed that you want to...

**NH:** Ohhh, geez...

**PB:** ...get on the record?

**NH:** Ohhh, it was so much... My daughter's gonna run for President one day, and if you guys--you'll be older--but just vote for her. 'Cause she's already went up against Nancy Pelosi, so yeah. She's 12, she's got like 20, 23 years. Y'all got 23 years.

**PB:** What's her name so we know who to vote for?

**NH:** It's Kailaini Jones. Yep. Mmhmm. She's already set that as her goal on her vision board, yep.

**PB:** Actually, with that, I want to have one more question.

**NH:** Okay.

**PB:** How has your organizing work influenced your children? Have they gotten...have you seen them getting involved? And like, you told that one story about your daughter, but I guess like more generally.

**NH:** All...all of my kids have gotten involved in it, even my older kids, which has surprised me. Like, my son doesn't buy bottled water anymore, and he kind of like

hounds his friends when he sees 'em with bottled water. [clears throat] And, they basically just spread all the news to everybody. Like, "Did you hear this and this and that? My momma was saying this and this and that." So like, it's kinda hard for me to go like hang out in my son's house because his friends like act like I'm some kind of celebrity, but I'm not. And they're like, "This is your mom? Oh wow, it's so nice to meet you!" And it's like, okay. I just wanted to know what he was drinking. You know, like, whatever.

So, I think it has influenced them in a positive light, and I think that it's made them more caring about other people. It kind of broke that cycle of that narcissistic attitude because my kids had it, too. I'm not gonna lie. My son was like if it is not about me--and then he thinks he's cute, too, so that helped. So every once in a while as a parent, just remember you have to take your kids down a notch and be like, "You're not that cute. I remember when you were ugly. You just grew into your looks." You have to let 'em know. It's not to be rude, but it keep 'em humble. You know, it keep 'em humble. So, I think that just the fact that I see with my younger kids like them saying things that they've learned to their friends and be like, "You need to tell your momma to quit bringing them bags of water in the house. We don't buy bottled water." And they'll be like, "Why?" "Well, first of all," and then they go to talking about the Nestle hearings, and their friends are like, "Oh my God, really? Ooh, I'm gonna tell my momma." Tell your momma, yep, tell your mom.

So, I think that's been a good influence, and then it's also helped my kids to be more confident in standing up for themselves, even in aspects that don't have anything to do with social justice, like they don't let anybody walk over them anymore because they're like I can stand up for myself, you know. I know how to advocate for myself. That's what it is. So, I think it's definitely been a positive for them, and they've got to travel and see a lot of stuff, too.

**PB:** Does anybody else have questions for her?

**Antoine Wells [AW]:** I have one question.

**NH:** I knew it.

**AW:** [laughs] You mentioned the Great Lakes Water Authority...

**NH:** Mmhm.

**AW:** ...taking over the Detroit Water Department.

**NH:** Mmhm.

**AW:** Is it like contracted or did they literally take over the Water Department?

**NH:** It's like more so like the decision-making power they've taken over. Detroit still has a Water Department, but the decision making is through GLWA [Great Lakes Water Authority], which means that the suburbs has more decision making on our Water Department than we do now.

**PB:** They lease the whole infrastructure.

**NH:** Yeah. Yeah.

**AW:** Thank you very much.

**NH:** Okay.