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

Shea Howell

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER AND ORIANA YILMA

March 23, 2019

Detroit, MI

Narrator

Shea Howell has been a Detroit activist for more than three decades. She works with youth, artists, and community-based development. She lectures on issues of social difference and peace and wrote a weekly column for the newspaper Michigan Citizen. She is a co-founder of Detroit Summer and of the Boggs Center (James and Grace Lee Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership). She is a professor of communication at Oakland University where she has taught for 30 years. Over the last decade, she has been working with the Michigan Roundtable on school and community-based initiatives for community reconciliation. This work is informed by her activities with the Beloved Communities Initiative, which was formed to encourage spirit-rooted activism.

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

In this interview, Shea Howell describes her history as an activist in the city of Detroit for almost four decades, including the formative experiences and readings that shaped her as a child and young adult. She describes meeting James and Grace Lee Boggs and the process of joining their group of activists, the National Organization for the American Revolution, in the 1970s. Howell shares her perspective on the changes in the city of Detroit through its period of bankruptcy and emergency management, specifically sharing insights on the water shutoffs and the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History. She describes her participation with groups such as the Detroit Independent Freedom Schools and Detroit Summer.

Keywords

Antiwar movement; Black Power movement; Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership; Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History; Civil rights movements; Coleman Young; Communications; Detroit bankruptcy; Detroit Summer; Detroit, Michigan; Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management; Electoral politics; Emergency management; Foreclosure crisis; Gentrification; Grace Lee Boggs; Hantz farms; James Boggs; Journalism; Lila Cabbil; Marxism; Media; Poletown; Save Our Sons and Daughters; Tax foreclosures; Urban gardening; Vanguard parties; Water shutoffs; Wayne Curtis; Women's movement

Restrictions

None

Original Format

.mp4 file

Transcript

Transcribed by Colleen Cirocco on August 5-18, 2019.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Shea Howell, interviewed by Peter Blackmer and Oriana Yilma, March 23, 2019, transcript, *Voices from the Grassroots Oral History Collection*, Detroit Equity Action Lab, Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights, Wayne State University Law School.

Detroit Equity Action Lab
Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights
Wayne State University Law School
Detroit, MI

Transcript of interview conducted March 23, 2019 with:

Shea Howell [SH]

Detroit, MI

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

[Pre-interview discussion]

SH: ...'Cause we've got a bunch of water experts that are putting together a curriculum. Someone told me about the Take Back the Tap group...

OY: Yeah.

OY: And I think signed something--maybe one of their petitions on reducing bottled water use on campus...

SH: Mmhm.

OY: ...and stuff like that. Yeah. But I haven't had a chance to like really look into them.

SH: Yeah. That's...that's everything I know about them.

OY: [laughs]

SH: Investigating.

PB: Have you got in touch with DAYUM [Detroit Area Youth Uniting Michigan]?

SH: Oh sure, yeah. I gave a--they showed Grace's film the other night, and I gave a presentation for them.

PB: Ah.

SH: Conversation afterwards. It was really interesting, actually, and I know Julia pretty well.

PB: Oh.

SH: Yeah.

PB: So they had--[coughs] excuse me--one of their student leaders was at World Water Day speaking…

SH: Yeah!

PB: ...yesterday.

SH: Yeah. Which one?

PB: ReJoyce Douglas.

SH: Oh sure, yeah. She's really good.

PB: Yeah, I got that from the brief talk she gave.

SH: [clears throat]

PB: I wrote her name down. Hopefully we can bring her in as well, too.

SH: Yeah!

PB: And talk to--'cause that's something I think we all got to be mindful of is making sure that we get voices of some of the younger generations, too.

SH: Yeah, do you have Julia Putnam.

PB: Yes, she's on the list. We actually just met a couple weeks ago. Pam Sporn was in town.

SH: Oh sure, yeah. Yeah, I keep trying to get to see that film.

PB: You haven't seen it yet?

SH: I haven't seen it yet, no.

PB: It's...it's available through Wayne States' Library and copies at the Boggs Center as well that Rich has.

SH: Yeah.

[Pre-interview discussion ends]

OY: Okay, could you just give us your name, where you live, and your organizations and affiliations?

[0:00:00]

SH: My name is Shea Howell. I live on Steel Street in the northwest side of Detroit [Michigan], where I've lived for 41 years this year. And organizations, well, the Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership, Detroit Independent Freedom School movement, the Black Legacy Coalition to Protect the Charles H. Wright Museum [of African American History], the Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management. That's most recent. Oh, and Riverwise [Magazine]. How could I have forgotten Riverwise? Riverwise!

[0:00:48]

OY: So, could you describe the neighborhood when you were growing up or when you got here?

SH: Yeah, I better do when I got here. I came to Detroit in 1973. And, it's funny. I was just up the street from here. I was part of something called the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, which was a national organization created by Angela Davis--do you know that?

OY: Yeah.

SH: Okay, just checking to make sure you know. Anyways, [Oriana laughs] it was shortly after she had been acquitted for charges of murder, and she created this big organization, and I came to their conference, and Coleman Young was about to become mayor, Erma Henderson on the city council, John Conyers, Charles Diggs, and they came out on stage to welcome Angela Davis to Detroit and gave her the keys to the city. And, I thought, "Any city that would honor Angela Davis"--who was probably the most hated woman in the country at that moment, certainly by white people--I thought, "Any city that will honor her,"--and essentially they said, "We got your back."--"that's a city I want to be a part of," I thought. So, I was able to come to Wayne State [University] to work on my Ph.D. And shortly after I got here, I met Grace [Lee Boggs] and Jim Boggs and stayed.

So, I came to Detroit at a time when I thought the revolution would be maybe next week, maybe two weeks would've been the outside, because the feeling in the city was one of the triumph of Black Power, the triumph of a different way of thinking about who we could become as a place. And, what a lot of people don't realize now is that the call to Black Power was a call to all Americans. It wasn't only for Black folks. It was for everybody to come and be part of creating something new. So, this is the place for me, I thought. So, that's how I came.

[0:03:14]

PB: Could you talk about--and we're spanning some time here--but could you talk about some of the major or thematic changes you've seen taking place in the city through your eyes over the past few decades?

SH: Well, if we go all the way back to [19]73, Detroit was still over a million people. And so, the biggest change, of course, has been the shrinking of the city, and probably--I mean, everyone knew Detroit was losing population, and there were a few moments when that was very obvious. But looking back over that arch of 40 years, I would say the worst was 2008 with the foreclosure crisis. That was such a devastation. In my neighborhood in 2010--I walk my dog. I've had a series of dogs over 40 years, but it's the same walk. I walk one mile up and one mile back, and 2010, 2009, every single block had at least one home that had been foreclosed on and sometimes two or three or four. And, my neighborhood had

been pretty stable through the entire time when Detroit was shrinking, and it had been very low turnover. It was a very stable working class African American community. And after 2008, it looked like a vacuum had come through and yanked people out of various houses, and we're still recovering from that, and it's over a decade. So, I think, for me, the foreclosure crisis was the most visible assault on the city.

[0:05:13]

PB: I want to come back to that in greater detail, but in--this question might precede your time in Detroit, but I'm trying to get an idea about how people are becoming active in social movements. So, could you kind of paint us a picture of how you first got involved in either protest activity or organized action?

SH: Yeah. I'm left-handed. And when I was six, I could already read and write, and I went to school and picked up one of those big fat pencils, and the teacher smashed my hand with a ruler--this was a public school in Appalachia--and she said I was doing the work of the devil, which I did not believe in. And so, we went round and round a few times. And the third day, I'd had several of these slaps on my hand. So, I figured, enough of this. I decided I would not continue school to learn to read and write. I didn't think they had anything to teach me. So, I would leave my little apartment, and everyone would walk up the hill to school, and I went down over the hill to the what they called the hobo town, which was where what we would now think of is where homeless folks live, and I learned how to make coffee on an open fire. I learned how to fish. I had a blast until I got caught by the school a week-and-a-half later, noticing that I wasn't there. So, I learned early on that people in authority don't actually know very much, that frequently their ideas are not good for you, and my father went and negotiated with the school so I could stay left-handed. He pointed out he didn't believe in the devil either, and many people in our family were left-handed. So, I say that I came by my radicalism pretty early and had the great good fortune of being a young person during the height of the Civil Rights movement.

When I was able to come to consciousness--I graduated from high school the year after the March on Washington and went to a small college where we invited Dr.

[Martin Luther] King to come as part of a student group that brought King to speak at Marietta College in 1967 about three months before--no, two months, three weeks before he gave his speech against the Vietnam War and from that organized part of the Poor's People's Campaign, and that was a total disaster from beginning to end because King was killed and we didn't know what to do. And that sort of... I grew up in that milieu and mostly through the Civil Rights movement and then the Anti-war movement and then of course of the Women's movement. So, those were all part of my growing-up experience and becoming an adult.

[0:08:20]

PB: So as you're going through this process of becoming politically active, who were some of your influences? Who is shaping your political thought? What were you reading? Could you walk us through that time and evolution?

SH: Boy, that would be--you know, I heard today is Lawrence Ferlinghetti's 100th birthday, and Bob Woodward on public radio read "I Am Waiting," and I thought, "Oh God, I haven't thought about Lawrence Ferlinghetti in a long time," but the minute he read the poem I remembered it, *Coney Island of the Mind*. So, one of the good things about the [19]60s, there were lots of good things to read that were easily available. So, I read things like *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon. All of King's speeches were available. Malcolm X's autobiography everybody carried around. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Langston Hughes, there was a milieu of reading.

But I think, for me, I read some Simone de Beauvoir. I had a professor who taught us French Revolutionary history, and we had to study some French intellectual. So, I sat down with Simone de Beauvior and read all of her books. I remember I had a rocking chair, and she'd written so many, I stacked them up like this high. And as I read them, they'd go on the other side. She had a big impression on me. Mostly now, there are two titles. One was *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and the other *The Force of Circumstance*, which were her--*Force of Circumstance* is her autobiography, and those two phrases have been phrases that echo, not so much the works themselves. But, I was just thinking today about Detroit and the force of circumstance, how much circumstance here causes us to react in certain ways.

And, the ethics of ambiguity is a life question. How do we live an ethical, responsible life? So, Simone de Beauvoir certainly as somebody that was kind of unusual.

The other person I read--one summer, I read all of George Orwell's writing because someone had said to me, "If you want to be a good writer, you should read George Orwell," and I loved his essays. He's got some essays that are just wonderful to read. So, Orwell. Certainly [Herbert] Marcuse, certainly when I think about early--you're asking early, right, not later? But, I mean, everybody read--we were in Marxist study groups, so you read [Karl] Marx. I still like [*Das*] *Kapital*, and I love the manifesto, *The Communist Manifesto.*

I think a book that had a tremendous impact on me was *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson. Did you ever read that? It's a book worth reading now. It was written in the [19]50s. I was in...just out of middle school. My French teacher--we were in this little tiny coal mining town, but my French teacher had gone to college with--she was Rachel Carson's roommate. And when Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring*, she sent a box to our school, and the French teacher said, "Enough with the French! Let's read this together." And so, our French class read *Silent Spring*, and it was...it's a phenomenal book about...it was essentially written about the pesticides and the killing at that time, the dying birds and insects because of DDT [Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane], and that had a tremendous impact on my thinking.

There have been many books since those early--[Lewis] Mumford on cities. But, I suppose the book that changed my life was *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century* by Jimmy and Grace because that was the first time in a long time I had--by the time I read that, I had been politically active for over a decade, I guess, but that was such a thoughtful view of how we could change this country and making the distinction between a rebellion and a revolution was something that had never occurred to me. I just sort of thought it was all one thing, and then to see that kind of systematic thinking about what a revolution is and how it has to be rooted in the particular history of the particular country changed how I saw the world and changed what I decided to do with the rest of my life. So, here I am.

So, those are some books. I mean, there have been many, many others. The ecofeminists I think are really important for people to read. I think Starhawk is amazing. I read everything she writes and has written. Most recently I think Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything [: Capitalism vs. The Climate]* is something people really ought to have. I just finished in my class using Tiya Miles' *The Dawn of Detroit*, which I think everyone ought to read, and we should rename all the streets, get rid of Macomb County [Michigan] as a name. So, you know, I read a lot, but those are books that have shaped me recently and in the past.

[0:14:43]

PB: Could you talk about how you first met James and Grace Lee Boggs?

SH: Yeah. I was in graduate school, and there was a woman in the class that would say the most astonishing things, an African American woman, and she would--I just...I couldn't believe how insightful she was and clear. So, we got to be friends, Pat (??) and I, and it turns out Pat (??) was working with Jimmy and Grace, and they had a long process of building a revolutionary organization, and it started with being invited to a small public meeting around a current event. So, Pat invited me to one of these public meetings. It was held at Kenny Snodgrass' house over on the East Side--have you interviewed Kenny yet? He's somebody you should probably... And, he's documented...he's got a lot of footage of Jimmy. Anyway, it was at Kenny Snodgrass' house, and Jimmy and a guy named Xavier Nicholas and Kenny led the discussion, and I have no idea what the current event was, but those were held monthly, and it was part of the recruitment. So, I met Jimmy in that kind of formal setting.

And then, if you went to maybe six months of those, you would get invited to a study group, and the study group was around *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century*. So, I went to a study group on that. And if you completed that, then you went to study on what they had written called--a book called *The Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party*. And if you read through that, then you could be invited into the organization as a probationary member, but that was a problem because at the time, other than Grace, it was all African American. So, the question was whether or not I make that next move into the probationary

status, and they decided okay. They figured at some point they had to do it. So if you're going to make an American revolution, it meant everyone. So, I became the first person of European descent to join the National Organization--well, at that time, it was the Advocators, but then it became the National Organization for the American Revolution.

So, I met Jimmy through that, and I loved him. He was terrific. He reminded me of people I'd grown up with, and we became pretty close friends for the rest of his life. And, I guess from roughly 1973 or 1974--about 1974--until Jimmy died in [19]93, I was at their home at least once a week, more likely once a day, for a long time. So, we did a lot of organizing in that period.

[0:17:52]

PB: Could you talk about--I want to get into the legacy that the Boggs had left in Detroit, but could you talk about some of the big lessons or some of the impacts that they have had upon your life or your thinking, your analysis, your organizing?

SH: Well, as I said earlier, the notion that there's a difference between a rebellion and a revolution and that a revolution has to come out of the contradictions of a particular country and that...that the contradiction of the United States fundamentally is the question of economic and technological overdevelopment and political and social underdevelopment and resolving that contradiction which expresses itself in different ways at different moments in our history is something that is our task as people who want to advance us towards revolution. And if the point of revolution is to make us more human, the way we become more human is by confronting the individual expressions of that contradiction as we move through time because they change. And as we solve one thing, another one comes out of it. So, those are key concepts. Change yourself to change the world is a big one. The notion that we have to have a vision of where we're going rather than just being critical of where we've been or what's wrong now. The idea that choices matter, it matters what we do, that our ideas matter, and that it's important to write and share what we do. Those are the big ones, I guess.

[0:19:51]

PB: So if we're zooming out, could you talk about some of their legacies in Detroit or where you see that influence continuing today?

SH: Well, there's the Boggs Center, and that continues to be both a place of ideas and a place of action and a place of conversation. There's the Boggs School, which is an expression of place-based learning and seeing children as--Grace's phrase--solutionaries, that they are the answer to the problem, not the problem, and that people develop best by confronting the challenges of rebuilding their community. So, that's the Boggs School. So, those are two things that bear their name.

There are a lot of people around they have influenced, you know, myself included, but there are a lot of us. I think that there is a notion in Detroit about the importance both of the city and of building the future as we fight, and that sense of building the future is very much something that Jim and Grace helped define, helped articulate, and helped say was important, that it's the essence of their distinction between rebellion and revolution. It's not enough to just be against something. You have got to have a sense of what you're for, and that what you're for is where you want people to put most of their energy. So, those are places where I see them.

There are a lot of organizations that they started that are still in existence. Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice, SOSAD [Save Our Sons and Daughters]. So, they've had that kind of organizational influence or institutional influence, but I think much more that their ideas are very, very much a part of how people think about the city. I was just quoted the other day--Jimmy's *American Revolution [: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook]*, which he wrote in 1963, and he talks about automation and how automation means that we are developing an expanding class of outsiders, people who will never be incorporated into the job system, and even with the coming of both--the coming of the new Fiat Chrysler plant, that will never resolve the question of what are people for. 6,000 jobs sounds like a lot now, but when Jimmy was working in the plant, they had 30,000 people in one plant. So, 6,000, it's nothing in the grand

scheme of things. So, Jimmy's understanding that capital was making people disposable and dispensable was--is--a critical idea. So, even though they wrote...Jimmy hasn't written--you know, he died in 1993--a lot of their insights are really important to look at.

[0:23:09]

PB: I'm thinking back to that process that you were explaining in terms of all the steps of going through to being a part of your organization.

SH: Yeah, we used to say that you could give birth to an elephant faster than you could join this organization.

PB: So, it sounds to me like that's building a vanguard.

SH: Yeah, we were.

PB: Could you talk about what a vanguard party is a little bit? I mean, we don't have to go all the way down the rabbit hole but...

SH: [laughs] Yeah, that's a big rabbit hole.

PB: Could you talk about what you've learned about that method or model of organizing?

SH: Well, that's a complicated question. The history of vanguard parties comes out of a tendency in the radical movement that was written--in our case, we were all very influenced...we were part of the Trotskyist side of things. So, I don't want to go trotting down that rabbit hole with you as you said, but there was this notion that social change happens because you create a vanguard party that develops

the ideas and programs to develop people to create a revolution, and the reason you needed a vanguard party was the capitalist class was so--not only controlled people physically, but they controlled people's ideas, and they controlled people's thinking. And so, the role of the vanguard party was to create a mechanism that would develop ideas and programs that could counter the ideology and control of capital. So, that was the notion.

In practice, those tended to be sectarian, heavily ideological, and difficult experiences for a lot of people. I don't think anybody who was in--the vanguard party we created was called the National Organization for the American Revolution--I don't think anybody who was in that, no matter when they were in it or left, would say anything other than it was a rich experience where all of us learned a lot, and almost everyone who was in that has remained committed at some level to the movement.

My own historical analysis is we were trying to create a vanguard party at the historical moment when vanguard parties were no longer relevant, and they were very much coming from a model of social change that was very mechanistic and very much shaped by industrial thinking. We didn't realize it at the time. [laughs] We could only see that looking back, but now I think when I saw somebody walk out of here with Adrienne [Maree Brown]'s *Emergent Strategies [Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds]*, I think that's much more my thinking now about how social change occurs, but I wouldn't have been able to be at this place if I hadn't have gone through that other experience of seeing the limitations of the vanguard party. Is that the kind of thing you're interested in?

PB: Yes.

SH: Yeah, it could be a long discussion, but we don't need to go there.

PB: [inaudible] As soon as we start talking about sectarianism...

SH: Yeah, sectarianism is…

PB: We could spend the next eight hours talking about it.

SH: Yeah. [laughs]

[0:26:41]

PB: I do want to come back to what you mentioned about how Adrienne's *Emergent Strategies* influenced your thought. So, you mentioned that that's more closely aligned with your thinking about social movements right now. Could you just flesh that out a little bit?

SH: Sure, maybe a little bit longer. One of the things that happened was in 1980 when we were still in the National Organization for the American Revolution but Coleman Young announced the closing of, the breaking down of an entire community that bordered Hamtramck [Michigan] and Detroit. It was called Poletown. And as an organization, we were beginning to work at the community level because we had seen--Ronald Reagan had become president, and he had done so with really racist, straight-up racist rhetoric, and we were witnessing increased pressure on the community. So, we got involved in the struggle to save the Poletown community from the General Motors plant. And in that struggle, we became involved with community people of all kinds. And from that, we began to see that the old Marxist thinking that had kept our thinking in the plants was really no longer where social change would happen, that the Black Power movement and now the changes in the country were more and more saying that we needed to create power within the community. So, our first shift was to start looking at the community and creating power within that rather than in the confines of a plant.

Once you start thinking about the community as a source of power, you begin to see that you're not the only one starting to notice stuff's falling apart. All kinds of people are doing all kinds of things, and a lot of it had nothing to do with ideology and had everything to do with trying to figure out how you lead a life with some

integrity and some dignity when everything around you is falling apart. And, it's from that that we found people like the Gardening Angels who were saying when you take a house away, you take more than a house. You take all the memory and all of the relationships. And so, these were older African American women who were watching people leave and leave behind not only their house but the rosebush that they had planted for their fiftieth wedding anniversary, the apple tree they planted when their daughter was born, the hedges that they put up because they were fighting with their neighbor. So, these older women decided that what they wanted to do was take the plants that had some story and put them in an empty lot next to them, and they created what they called "The Memory Book," and their idea was that when people came back, they would give them the plant from the house with the story, you know, so they could create this connecting memory. And, we started to work with these women and began to see that they had a vision of community that was far richer than anything we had and far more tangible, and these were the same women who then started the urban gardening programs throughout Detroit.

So when you see people in the community who are taking hold of their own lives and defining how they're going to live, you start noticing that things are emerging everywhere--hence, emergence. And, Margaret Wheatley, Meg Wheatley's famous quote that in the twentieth century, people were making social movements on a mechanical model. They were looking for critical mass, and that's what we were doing with the vanguard party. But in the twenty-first century, what we're looking for are critical connections, and that, as things emerge, there's a different kind of energy that's created that leads to the creation of the new--hence, emergent strategies. So, that's kind of how we got to emergent strategies, by seeing things emerge. But, the good thing was we were open to seeing things emerge. And in part, it was because of the dramatic kinds of questions that people faced. When you're faced with empty lots, you're faced with how do you see that as open space? How do you feed yourself when the grocery stores close down? All of those questions were right here for us to look at, all of us.

[0:32:01]

PB: So, I guess that… Oh, yeah. Please.

OY: So, based off of what you already said with like the work that Riverwise [Magazine] does about spreading information about grassroots activists, do you think that in your lifetime it's become easier or more difficult to promote information and communication about community involvement?

SH: Both. It is both easier and more difficult. [laughs] It's a both/and because it's, you know, sometimes we organize something on social media, and I think, "Oh man, you don't have to sit down and write mailing lists and fold papers and send them out? You don't have to do any of that?" So, there's no question that it is easier in some ways to connect and to create a momentary demonstration or get people out somewhere or spread information or sign a petition is like nothing now. It's so easy. But, you know, we've got 17,000 signatures for the "Stop the [Thomas] Jefferson Exhibit at the Wright." We did that in a week or two. And so, that kind of thing is easier.

I think having sustained conversation over ideas is harder. I think it is difficult for people to think clearly sometimes about the moment because you've got inundated with everything. So, this ability to reflect on what we're doing and why becomes harder because carving out spaces in your life when you're not being watched over with so much that's happening is difficult, and I don't think--well, if there's one thing I learned from Grace and Jim, you don't--acting isn't enough. You have to have some sense of why you're acting and some way to evaluate those actions so you can learn, and I think that's more difficult now because it's so easy to keep moving. So, does that answer your--that's partly why we write Riverwise. That's part of the responsibility of Riverwise is to carve out a little space where we can take a moment and say, "Huh, I didn't know that was going on, and what does that mean to what I'm doing?" How do we see these things that are emerging begin to converge to create a different kind of power in the community?

[0:34:48]

PB: To kind of piggyback off of what you mentioned about the importance of having thought to guide action, could you go a little deeper about that, about the

role of theory, the role of critical analysis within social movement building and progression?

SH: Well, let's take the Charles Wright Museum, for example. This is an interesting fight to me. First of all, I'm loving protesting because you get to shout, "Jefferson was a rapist! Jefferson was a pedophile!" Those are great chants. It seems silly in some way that you would protest a museum exhibit. I mean, of all of the things happening in this city, why would you go to the Charles H. Wright to protest? And, of course, the answer to that is unless you understand that we are in a moment where the white power structure is doing everything it can to restore white supremacy and destroy any sense of African American pride and sense their own potential, unless you understand that that's the moment we're in, that that's the assault, then you don't understand that what's happening at the Charles H. Wright Museum is a reflection of the effort to essentially take the heart out of the ability of the African American community to define its own history. It's placing in the forefront slavery, and it's placing in the forefront of slavery Jefferson, and it's placing in the forefront of Jefferson the notion maybe slavery wasn't so bad, maybe he had this love relationship. All of that is designed to protect the white notion that Jefferson is a good guy and say don't worry so much about slavery and let's just get over it and all be friends. I mean, that's their notion of...

So if you have that understanding of the historical moment and the theory about how the power structure works, you're able to see that this fight around the African American museum is a fight about self-determination. It's a fight about who gets to define history, and it's a fight to say we are not going to get rid of racism in this country if we do everything on lies. We have got to stop lying to each other. So, that's why it's important, but you don't know it's important just by saying, "Don't go to this exhibit," unless you have some analysis to go with it, in the same way as you don't know that our schools are failing not because our kids aren't capable, they're failing because they have been systematically destroyed since 1999, and part of the reason they've been systematically destroyed is because there was an Afro-centric curriculum that was advancing our kids on every measure, and that curriculum had to be taken away, that curriculum had to be stripped, and the schools had to be destroyed.

So, what you...what's happening in the Charles Wright is the little tiny extension of that larger assault on the power of the city that has maintained itself as predominantly African American, and that's no small task because in 1970 almost half the cities in this country over 100,000 were going to be majority or near-majority African American. Now, we're down to a handful. So, that didn't happen by accident. That happened because somebody--not one person, but somebodies figured out that if you want to maintain a capitalist economy, you are going to have to have a racialized arm of that. So, that's where theory helps, if that makes any sense. Does that answer--I don't know if that answers you, Peter.

[0:39:14]

PB: Yes, absolutely. I appreciate you bringing up the Charles Wright museum, too, because that's a perfect way of thinking through that conversation. It pre-empted me asking it, so...

SH: Oh, yeah. It's been fun.

PB: Let's just spend a minute talking about it, if you will. Who's a part of that struggle? What's going on? What's the state of that struggle? I guess for our concerns of the leadership of the museum and how people can support that.

SH: Yeah. Well, I just thought, how many do--just one step back, because people should know this. The Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management, when that fight was over, said, "Well, there's still an emergency manager in the school system." So, that led to DIFSM, the Detroit Independent Freedom School Movement, which is hosting--I think we have three sites right now. It might get back up to four. It hosts supplemental education that says--that's African-centric, that says we love kids and here's a safe space, which is not what they're getting in the schools. So, out of DIFSM is how we ended up concerned about the museum because one of the school sites is inside the museum, you know. It's not that people don't go if we don't go to the museum and support it, but I don't know if we would have been quite as attuned except that we're in the museum every Saturday now into our third year--into our fourth year at the end of this summer.

So, we’ve been there consistently, and the former director, Juanita Moore, was very supportive of us and was very willing to take some risks. She went along with us when we wanted to do a garden inside the museum grounds, and she said “Yeah, okay! Let’s do it!” So, we saw her as a community person, as a person with a lot of vision and willing to take risks, and she hired Charles Ferrell, who has done tremendous work in reclaiming the radical legacy of Detroit and making that legacy available through all kinds of public gatherings, whether it’s films or concerts or conversations or lectures. He’s been terrific.

So, the first thing that happens is Ms. Moore, suddenly her retirement is announced. Now, so of course people went and asked her, and she’s kind of cagey, but, no, she didn’t want to retire. She had no intention of retiring. That came about from her board. So, that’s our first clue, uh oh, something’s going on here. And then, we begin to realize that Charles Ferrell is under pressure, and his programs are under pressure. So, that’s a context that we have. And, the next thing we hear is they’re bringing Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello exhibit for Martin Luther King Day. Now, [laughs] yeah, it’s just like, no. That just doesn’t make sense. So then, it got backed back to African American History month. And then, it got bumped back and the women’s history month so that a pedophile can get celebrated, the rapist that--during women’s history month.

So, that’s kind of the evolution of how we got to this place, watching the changes and seeing this as an example of--we think either two things are happening. Either corporate control needs to make itself, and they don’t like the radical edge. They don’t like the kids that come in for the African World Festival and Dilla Day, you know, unsettles them. So, there’s that. But then, the other piece is that the question during the bankruptcy about where was the African American museum? How come it wasn’t in the grand bargain? How come it wasn’t up for sale? Like, it was like it didn’t exist. Every other stick of furniture in the whole city was on display, but not the African American museum, even though it’s city money. I mean, they took Belle Isle for God's sakes. So, it’s like what’s happening there? And, my own thinking is--and I think the coalition would agree--that there’s an effort by the DIA [Detroit Institute of Arts] to expand its campus and just take it over and that that’s what’s behind all of this.

That's why we're very clear to say, as part of Black Legacy Coalition to protect the museum, that we're advising people, please, take out a membership, please support it, become part of it. So, that's kind of the origin of the fight as I understand it, and key in it has been JoAnn Watson, who has been wonderful. There are five people whose names I can't remember now who have been elected to be part of the representatives of the community that we are offering to the board of directors as a slate of community representatives, and they include JoAnn Watson and Tawana Petty and I believe Malik Yakini. There were about two hundred some people at the first meeting where we began this process. Yeah, I mean, it's a broad coalition. It's not just a few. There's about 150 people on the Tuesday morning march, which it's not easy to get 150 out on a Tuesday morning, even with social media.

[0:45:17]

PB: So, I wanted to take us back, if you will, to where you started that, which was with DREM [Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management]. And so, if it's okay with you I would like to get into emergency management.

SH: Sure.

PB: So...

SH: I'm sorry. I'm old, so I know a lot of history. [all laugh]

PB: No, that's wonderful. It's a good problem for us to have. So, I'm wary of just jumping to ask you why was Detroit placed under emergency management. So, I also want to provide space if there's any kind of run-up between, say, the state takeover of the public schools and if there was writing on the wall for emergency management of the city to come in. So, I guess, could you walk us through kind of that lead-up to the imposition of emergency management?

SH: Coleman Young was elected mayor. That was the lead-up. [Laughs] And ever since, the white power structure has wanted the city back. And, I'm--I mean, I could give you many instances of that, but if you look at--they did everything they could to control Coleman. And by the end of his term, he was certainly a different man than he had been at the beginning. But if you then look at the progression of mayors after Coleman, they became increasingly lighter, whiter, more controlled by the corporate elites. And ultimately, of course, we end up with Mike Duggan, who I still don't think he was elected on a write-in campaign, but that's a different story. I mean, given that trajectory of the constant encroachment of the effort by corporate powers to get control back of the city, and once they took the school, then came the clear recognition that they were after the city.

So from 1999 on, it's been really clear that the way the corporate powers would take back the city was to defund it, to create financial emergencies, and to be able to move in. So that--I mean, that's been a series of laws. And certainly by the time they were looking at Detroit, what you could see was they had already taken Benton Harbor [Michigan], they had already taken Flint [Michigan], I believe, by then. It was obvious that the state was going to move in and take Detroit.

So, the first thing was the no consent agreement, or the consent agreement, and that's where we started organizing. I think the phrase was "no consent" because if the city council could agree to that consent agreement, they were then going to move right on to bankruptcy. There was going to be no stopping it. Even though I contend, as do many people, that there was no financial justification for that. If the state had provided the back revenue sharing it owed us or gave us some...an actual formula they should give us by law, there would not be a deficit in spite of the fact that the city had lost half of its population, in spite of the cutbacks, because the truth is Coleman Young was a pretty good financial administrator, and the truth is Detroiters had never voted down a single school tax or property tax. Once we finally voted down one school tax after things got way too crazy with the emergency manager, but otherwise this is a city that is the highest taxed not because people imposed it on us, we voted for it. There is a sense in the city that we will be responsible for our public life at a much higher level than you'll find in any of the suburbs. And so, that restriction of state funding that should have come back to the city is what led to the bankruptcy, and it was completely willful on the part of the state, and the state of course is run by a major corporation, so.

[0:49:54]

PB: So, with that kind of backdrop, could you walk us through the process of organizing against the state takeover of the city in general?

SH: Well, yeah. I mean, first--there were a lot of things that happened, but first we were organizing around the no consent. And from that, when the emergency manager was announced, people were sort of out picketing various places, and I believe it was Sarah Coffey who said, “We can’t just all keep showing up at each other’s picket lines. We need to organize collectively somehow,” and that’s what led to DREM, that all of the smaller organizations that were organizing in some way came together and tried to coordinate our efforts. And, you know, that has strengths and weaknesses because of course it’s people doing their own thing as well as trying to organize this larger collectivity, but I think we did pretty well in our public demonstrations. We helped support the court challenges, the pensioners, and then of course all got involved in the water shutoffs, which were all part of that bankruptcy.

And, I think the other thing we did was continually disrupt the narrative that bankruptcy was essential, that the city had nobody in it that was competent, and that they had no idea what to do. Very early in the bankruptcy process, we produced our own People’s Plan of Adjustment about how to solve the bankruptcy problem. We held a big press conference, and we were able to counter that narrative. We were able to counter the narrative that the only thing you could do is raise water rates, and we have all kinds of documentation that that’s a foolish and uneconomical response. We, I think, helped pressure. What little the pensioners were able to create, we were able to help do. So, we intervened in critical spots. We kept an ongoing presence. I think we all knew we had to create an alternative narrative, and, particularly around the water shutoffs, I think we were very successful in pushing on that.

So, we met weekly as a large group. We had subcommittees that met probably two or three times in addition to that. We held public demonstrations. We--Bill

Wylie-Kellermann was here. He was the judge in our trial of Governor [Rick] Snyder. So, we created theater and drama. But, I think the most important thing is we continually pressured against what they wanted to do and kept a public stance against that action and offered alternatives to where they were headed.

[0:53:01]

PB: And what were some of those alternatives?

SH: Well, one alternative was that the state could pay us what they owed. That was a pretty good alternative. Another alternative was to redo the revenue-sharing formulas, and in the People's Plan of Adjustment, we talked about rebuilding the city by using money to hire young people and train young people, and it's a whole plan.

But, I think another alternative which I can't--it was almost completely blacked out by the press, but your law school was part of it, and that was to use the pension fund to buy the Water Department. It was the Haas Institute [for a Fair and Inclusive Society] and MOSES, and the Damon Keith Law Center had hosted this forum, and one of the ideas that some scholars in Ohio had come up with, they had done--some economists--they had demonstrated that you didn't actually need to reduce the pension fund at all, that you could use the pension fund to take over the debt of the Water Department, which, by the way, never defaulted. So, you could use that pension fund by the Water Department as a public trust, continue to fund the pensions, and continue to provide water at a reasonable rate. Would have been a great idea. It had one op-ed that appeared, but we couldn't get any hearing from anyone. So, that was a pretty good alternative to bankruptcy.

So, those were the kinds of things that we generated. To water shutoffs, we had the water affordability plan that had been adopted by the city council more than a decade--now almost two decades ago--and that hooks your water usage to your income--your water bill to your income, not your usage--and Baltimore

[Maryland]'s now doing that, and it works. We spend more for shut offs than we do for water assistance. What kind of economic sense is that?

So, part of what we talked about earlier, this notion of emergence, what is emerged in the city are actual policies that would make life better for everyone, whether it's the water affordability plan or community land trust to take land off speculation or the use of pensions to provide for public good. Many places now are looking toward public banking. These are things that are emerging in the community that tell us we actually could create that kind of city we all looked for back in the [19]70s. We could actually do that still. But, that's… I mean, that's the struggle that's ahead of us, but a lot of those ideas came out of the bankruptcy process that we had to be able to show here's a different way to develop.

[0:56:20]

PB: So, you mentioned the relative media blackout of the forum at the Keith Center [Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights], and I'm hearing that throughout these interviews, this general theme of media blackouts of grassroots organizing that I can't help but read as being deliberate. So, in that kind of context when you're trying to push out narratives, when you're trying to organize people, how do you deal with the fact that there is such seemingly intentional little media coverage?

SH: Well, depends on how much you think people pay attention to the mainstream media. I mean, I do pay attention. I study it and all that, but I think people pay a lot of attention to all of these other forms that are emerging. One of the things about the internet and the digital world is that we have learned how to personally document things and send it out on a quick post. That Black Lives Matter movement got no media attention and didn't need it for a while, and I argue that the media attention didn't help them. So, there's a strong alternative media. And in another hour or so, we could look back at the long history in Detroit of alternative media that people have looked to, whether you're talking about Broadside Press or the Michigan Citizen or the Fifth Estate. I mean, there's a huge number of publications that have authored this alternative view, but now we've got the Detroit Narrative Agency. We've got, whatever they're called, This Will

Become. We've got the People's Platform that comes out with regular newsletter. We've got Riverwise [Magazine]. There is both a written and a digital sophistication about analysis and possible actions that you can find fairly quickly in this city.

The reason you need the media, the mainstream media, in my view, is not so much for the city, but those who surround us get their view of the city from the media, and they make policies that affect us. In the fight to repeal the emergency manager legislation, which was a statewide referendum, Russ Bellant--have you talked with him yet? Russ was one of the main guys in this. He went everywhere. I don't know if you know the referendum process, but you have to have a hundred signatures in every county, so you have to go all over. So, when the vote--the state voted down the emergency manager legislation, only two counties voted for it, Macomb [County, Michigan] and Oakland [County, Michigan]. Now, why would the two counties closest to Detroit vote for emergency management when Lenawee County Michigan] didn't? You know [laughs], and the only reason I can come to is they are so shaped by the racist views of Detroit that they think in their little heads, "Yes, those people can't govern themselves. They need us to come in there." And so, that's why they voted for emergency management. It's a telling, very telling vote, when you look at how that happened. And, that's why we need the mainstream media because--not so much for the city, but for what gets out into the larger suburb because they make decisions about our lives. They do.

[1:00:16]

PB: So, could you talk a little bit about--I mean, you've touched upon this, so we've kind of gone there--but some of the major impacts or ways that the city has been impacted by emergency management, by bankruptcy, and the policies that have followed?

SH: Well, probably the worst thing that happened were the water shutoffs, which, I mean, at the peak, 100,000 people without water, and we pushed at every level imaginable, but part of it was the court case where the judge ruled that people do not have a right to water, and that's a legal...that's now a legal statement. That's pretty crazy. So, it gives us a direction for organizing, obviously, if we need a law

that says we have a right to water. But, that was a horrific policy, and that's directly related to bankruptcy, the decision to shut off people's houses.

The second thing is the now increasingly complicated foreclosure scandal which had not only to do with the banks but the tax, lack of correct assessment by the city, which has led to the constant eradication of neighborhoods, including ones like my own, which were stable. So, there's obviously a land grant going on facilitated by the bankruptcy process and the targeting of neighborhoods. I think one of the best pieces of work to come out of the bankruptcy is the *Mapping the Water Crisis*, which shows the areas where shutoffs happen are the very areas where the Detroit Future City said, "This is where we need to shrink the city," and they are the very areas where the school closures are happening and where the foreclosures are concentrated. So, when you lay map over map over map, you see that some neighborhoods are clearly targets for eradication and other neighborhoods are targets for resources to build them up. So, that's a legacy of bankruptcy.

I think the other casualty is Detroit had gone through a pretty open thoughtful process about creating a new charter which mandated citizen participation at a variety of levels, and one of the things that we never got to fully implement that charter because it was to go into being when the bankruptcy hit and all of the elected officials were set aside. So, the charter didn't get in, and then we never got to fully implement it because the process of implementation were not pushed by our new mayor, in part because I don't think he believes in citizen engagement. I think he thinks active citizens are a nuisance. So, that charter was disrupted by bankruptcy, and then they decided, well, it says in this charter the one thing we really have to do is reevaluate it and rewrite it. So now, we are writing a new charter process with people--people essentially put in power by the mayor--to rewrite that charter, and I suspect--I'm sure we'll do what we can to get citizen engagement mandated in it, but that's clearly what's going to be lost in this process. So, you... Here you have people around the country doing things like fighting for an elected police commission. We've got that already. That may go. Who knows what's going to go in this charter? But, I know the police don't like that group. So, all these things that people struggled for and created that are designed to protect the lives of everyone are the things that are encoded in that charter are going to go. So, that's another casualty.

I--probably a casualty that people don't think about but related to the water is this water tax, the sewer tax, the rain tax, as people call it, which is going to hit the Black church primarily, as institutions. I mean, people are facing between 5[000] and 25,000 dollar water bills for back sewage, and none of these churches can do that. So, either they get with the mayor who gives them little way to get around it, or they're going to fold, and those are the last spaces in neighborhoods kind of hanging on. So, my guess is the first churches that will go will be in the same neighborhood where you have the water shutoffs, the school closing, the foreclosures. And now, the churches will go because they're the last vestige of resistance.

[1:05:31]

PB: So, could we connect the dots between the school closures, tax foreclosures, the water shutoffs? What's the picture that emerges for you?

SH: Well, their picture is they want a smaller, whiter, wealthier city that is primarily built up on the 7.2 miles from New Center down to the river and along the river, and the rest of it--a couple of good neighborhoods for people to live in, and then the rest of it will have a few people who serve that larger, richer area. That's what I think they want. Maybe some nice homes on lakes that they make on what used to be neighborhoods. That's in the Detroit Future City plan. You can go look at that. That's not some crazy fantasy I just made up. But, I think that's the plan, and that's happened in many other cities. So, the question is whether or not we have created enough political power and can create and expand the power. We've got to stop that because there's no need to have a city that is disgusting. We can make a different city still.

[1:06:52]

PB: So, the thing that keeps coming to mind with this is we have elected city council. In theory, we have an elected mayor. And during emergency management, the city council is held powerless, more or less. The school board is

held powerless, right, in exile. What role can and should, in your analysis, electoral politics be playing in this context in a different kind of city?

SH: Well, you know, since I believe in emergence, I think it's emerging anyway, and I think elected officials follow what emerges. So, I think we just...our job is to make that emergence bigger, stronger, more collective. So, that's the one side of it. I think the amount of money that it takes now to run for city council in Detroit is crazy. Obviously, there are corporate pressures there. I think the city council lost its voice and has yet to find it back. I think there are some good people on there now. I think there should be some more good people on it. But, it's...the city council will resonate with what people bring to it. We went to the city council this week over the Charles H. Wright because the city pays for it. It's got too many numbers in its budget, so hopefully there'll be some of that back and forth.

But, our elected institutions are in big trouble. The best thing is to see the new US Congress. It gives you some hope, and to see the kind of work Stephanie Chang is doing as our senator. She's put forth a water bill at the state level, and there's a water bill at the federal level that I think [John] Conyers might have put in before he got in trouble, but I certainly know that Brenda Lawrence is part of that effort to create water as a human right at the federal level with a whole host of things that follow from it. So, I think electoral politics is important. It's not sufficient, and it never leads the way. It never has, so I wouldn't be looking for that.

[1:09:18]

PB: So, I want to ask you--well, I want to go into greater depth about the independent freedom schools, and I also want to go into, you know, go back to the foreclosure crisis because it sounded like that was something that you had on your mind. But, one thing that's resonating with me, you know, we're talking about the charter revisions, and a lot of that is trying to destroy the revisions that Coleman Young's administration made when they came in, thinking specifically about police accountability, and when I hear you hear you talk about the trial of Governor Snyder, I'm thinking back to the People's Tribunal. So, I'm hearing it resonates across each generation. Can you speak to this historical continuity of legacies of

Black freedom struggles in the [19]60s, [19]70s up through right now, what the people in the city are organizing around?

SH: You know, I had an interesting experience the other day at the Boggs Center. We had a conversation on something. I can't remember what the specific was, but there were about thirty people sitting in a circle. One of them is a woman from Italy who now lives in Detroit, and she talked about her relationship--like, she was a neighbor of [Antonio] Gramsci. She had quite the radical leanings, and she was talking about being a part of the Italian communist party and all of that, and she said Detroit had given her an incredible gift, that she had gone to meeting after meeting where the first thing thing people did was say they wanted to honor the ancestors, and she said she had never heard that ever, anywhere in her radical life, and that had enabled her to think about these connections that go through generations.

So, I think that that is a...that's a part of African American culture that's a gift to all of us to think about, and that's certainly part of the Freedom Schools, this notion that there's...that spaces are best when they're intergenerational, and they are best when we are learning across our age differences or our experience differences or our skill differences. And, that's part of what's been a part of the Freedom Schools is this notion that we want intergenerational conversation, intergenerational interaction, and that was what Detroit Summer was founded on. I mean, our tagline was "A Multicultural, Intergenerational Youth Movement." So, I think that legacy of Detroit--there's a wonderful article written about...something about Detroit. I have to think about who wrote it, but her line was, "Every movement everywhere should send a thank you note to Detroit because of the incredible impact we've had on all of the movements."

[1:12:37]

PB to OY: Do you have anything on your mind?

OY: I mean, I had another question, but it wasn't necessarily related to that. It was more so about the role of allyship and what you consider to be the most important part of being an ally to struggles that don't always directly affect you?

SH: Oh, that's a really difficult question. If Tawana Petty were here, she would give you a lecture on the limitations on the concept of ally and the need to think about coliberation, which is not to say--and I think Tawana would argue--it's not to say that people don't have different positions of power by race, gender, age, income, all those things, but those positions of power are maintained at a human cost, and we don't have the language for it yet, but until we figure out how our humanity is bound up with each other, we're not going to move forward. So, I don't do what I do as an ally. I do it because my own humanity depends on knowing where I stand in this moment in time, and that for me is...that's a joyous thing, that's a liberating thing, and that's something that hopefully we can work together on in figuring out.

But, you know, Nelson Johnson said--do you know who Nelson Johnson is? Greensboro, North Carolina Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He's fabulous minister and thinker. He says about, "Where's the privilege in killing somebody? Where's the privilege in being a rapist? Where's the privilege in knowing what you got you stole?" Privilege doesn't catch it. It doesn't deal with the violence we have created as a nation on each other and particularly white people have created on each other. So, how we find a way to talk together and really look at that, that for me is the question. So, I think that's something we have to always think about, engage with, and name, you know. Race matters. Money matters. Gender matters. Sexual orientation matters. Who gets to decide matters. But, we have to talk about that. So, that's kind of how I think about it. And, Detroit does that. I mean, we're the only urban agricultural place I know that has a planting justice group that works on race and privilege and how to work together in some kind of thoughtful, intentional way. Do we mess it up? Sure, but it's clear that that has to be part of the conversation. You should read Tawana's stuff on it. She's got a book on coliberation. She's really thinking about what being a better human being means.

[1:16:23]

PB: So, can you take us inside a Freedom School meeting on Saturday?

SH: Well, this morning was terrific. They met--there's one that happens at the Shrine [of the Black Madonna], and they are littler people. They're really little. I think they're, you know, baby, elementary kind of things. The one at the Shrine is more middle school, and this morning was--the first half was African American drumming. So, there was a drum circle, and the master drummer came in, and this is I think their third drumming session. They've been ending--the last four had ended with drumming. So, I'm sitting out registering a new person who had come in, and I hear the drumming, and I actually stop and said, "Wow! This guy's really good!" I mean, they were doing some sophisticated rhythms and stuff. So, that's kind of whatever community members have to offer from an Afro-centric educational point of view is offered in the circle for free for kids whose parents bring them there on a Saturday morning. And, there's also... Some people volunteer to work with children with special needs who require more individual attention. After the African drumming, there was a lesson on poetry writing today, I think. So, every week, there's a different session. We did a wonderful, you know, 25 or 30 microscopes and about 25 or 30 kids, and we did a two week session on biology that was put together by a local doctor and his wife, and they brought lab coats for the kids, and they did slides, and they learned all about microorganisms and that sort of stuff. I think we might have the only math class in the city where people laugh and have fun. Math is terrific.

So, there's all different kinds of subjects. Our notion right now is to not try to create a sort of steady curriculum because we figure what we're doing is gathering people and practice because we think we're going to need to take over schools eventually, and we think that the public schools are clearly evaporating right in front of us and that we need some place children are going to need to go to be embraced. So, this is in preparation for that, but the structure itself is very much: We have a curriculum that goes from September to May. And then beginning in May, we start our gardening project, which this year is working with the museum and the science center. We've actually been working through the year with the museum and the science center. We're actually working through the year with both the museum and the science center to build a bioswale and a garden because there's so much concrete around the museum complexes that we've got to start creating water gardens, and it seemed like a natural extension of the

garden we've already done the summer before. So, that's kind of the Freedom School, and the Freedom School meets every Monday night as we have for three years plus, and there are about... I'd say there are about a core of 20 to 25 people who are pretty darn consistent in organizing this.

[1:20:07]

PB: Who is involved with that?

SH: Oh, my goodness. Paulina Mensa (??), Gloria House, I don't know. I know all--Maolani (???). I don't know his last name. Cheo (??). There's...it's a really broad--many of the people who were involved in the early Afro-Centric independent schools that--all of which have closed now--they are bringing this tremendous experience of curriculum and administration and child development. Dana Hart is part of this. Gloria House is part of this--I hope you're interviewing her. Yeah, she's part of all that. So, it's a pretty good sized coalition.

[1:21:04]

PB: And so, I want to come back to the tax foreclosure too, but I'm wondering if that might make sense to look at that through a specific example because I know that the Boggs Center is not far from the Hantz Farms.

SH: [Laughs] Yes.

PB: Do you… Could you talk a little bit about what the--tell us a story about the Hantz Farm situation and what the Boggs Center's relationship and position with it as a whole debacle was.

SH: [Groans] On the eve of bankruptcy, going through the non-consent agreement, John Hantz announced that he wanted to buy very cheaply 10,000

acres. Now, the new Chrysler Fiat Plant, just to give you a sense of scale, is 200 acres. He wanted 10,000, and plan number one was he wanted to build a commercial farm, and he thought--and he said in his Wall Street Journal interview that he was doing this to take the land off the market to drive the prices up on the East Side because he was a landowner from the East Side. So, he had no interest in urban farming. The mainstream media started talking about, “Oh, there’s this new idea in Detroit called urban farms, and there’s this guy, white and rich, who’s doing it!” And, you know, he of course hired somebody else to do it, but nonetheless.

When we saw this and saw how it was being marketed, the Boggs Center immediately started raising questions as did my column in the Michigan Citizen. So, I was writing regularly through the bankruptcy process. But anyway, I started raising questions about Hantz and that led to at that point--because the city council was still functioning, they had to have public hearings. So, people lined up at the city council, and they slowed it down and slowed it down and slowed it down. And ultimately, right on, I think, the week before bankruptcy is when the city council voted to give him not 10,000 acres, but I think it was a little less than 2,000 lots, which is maybe 150 acres all together, and he no longer had this grand vision of an urban farm. He had decided it would be hardwood trees. I don’t know if you see any of these, but they’re kind of sad. They sort of sit there. But, it was a great--there was a giant public meeting with the city council the night before they voted in favor of him, one of the churches down on Jefferson, and there were over a thousand people who were there for hours. I would guess about sixty or seventy people spoke, and I only counted three in favor of Hantz farm, and the city council voted for it anyway. So, that tells you...that’s one of the reasons why there’s only so far you can go with the city council.

But by that point, what he was proposing and what he was able to do had been greatly diminished. So, Hantz Farm is an example both of the power of the corporation but also the power of people to change where he was headed because that--now, he’s out there with his little farms, and I don’t know where that’s headed. He’s been kind of overshadowed by other development all together because the land grants have accelerated since the bankruptcy, but Hantz farm is a good example. The Boggs Center opposed him. I was working at the time on a thing called RECI, the Riverside [Riverfront] East Congregational Initiative, which was a group of churches on the East Side. We were intentionally coming together

to try to magnify buying power purchas--use of economics, and we invited Hantz in, and they came and made a presentation to RECI, and the group voted not to support him because of clearly what he was doing. So, there was a lot of resistance to Hantz, and it diminished him, but it didn't stop him, which I guess is the way of resistance these days.

[1:25:52]

PB: So, in their interest of time...

SH: Oh, yes!

PB: We're at about 1:45. So, before--I think I can ask a couple more questions, but I wanted to check what your schedule is like. I know we scheduled until 2 but wanted to...

SH: I'm a little flexible on the end.

PB: Okay. So, we'll try to wrap up at 2. I wanted to wrap up...

SH: Well, I'm a little flexible. So, I can go a little over if you need to, but not too long. [all laugh]

PB: We want to be respectful of your time. I just want to give you an idea of where I want to bring us to wrap it up. We're asking everyone about what their vision for the future of the city is and then also asking--so you don't feel blindsided by this--we're asking everyone if they would like to share or offer a tribute or speak to the legacy of Lila [Cabbil] in the city. So, that's, I guess, where we're heading, to give you a heads up. But, you mentioned Detroit Summer before. Could you talk about Detroit Summer, what it was, and where you see the legacies of Detroit Summer resonating today?

SH: In the mid [19]80s, we were marching against crack houses with a woman named Dorothy Garner, and those were not anti-crack marches. Dorothy would walk up to a crack house and announce in this wonderful loud voice, "We are here because we love you. We hate what you are doing to our community, but we love you," and I saw her do that over and over again, and I saw her do that in front of a house where six young men had been killed the day before, and she insisted we go and pay our respects to the people that were left there. So, we did these marches, and we were also working with a group called SOSAD, Save our Sons and Daughters. Something like 43 young people had been killed in one year, tremendous violence in the city at that time.

So anyway, every place we went, WePROS [We the People Reclaim Our Streets], Detroiters for Dignity, SOSAD, all the old people like me would say, "Those are kids aren't worth anything. There aren't any young people here," unless they were really little, you know, grand--So, some of us said, "Well, we don't know if those kids aren't interested in the city. No one's asked. There's a good reason why a kid in your neighborhood's not going to walk against a crack house, but maybe they have some other idea." So, we decided to see what people in the city thought. So, the Boggs Center, which was then--I don't know what we were. Detroiters for Dignity by then. We were Detroiters for Dignity, SOSAD, the Detroit Greens--we were a part of them--and WePROS were the main organizations that called together a public meeting.

It was for Martin Luther King Day of 1992, and it snowed. So, we cancelled the meeting and stuck a sign on the door saying, "Let's meet next week." 60 organizations showed up. So, we collectively in an open transparent group process decided to invite young people in the city and around the country to work with community organizations, and community organizations proposed projects, and the criteria were that they had to be visible, doable, and community driven. So, we did community gardens. We did a survey of fisher people on the river with Clean Water Action. We worked with a house that was providing housing for people living with AIDS [Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome]. We worked with housing rehabilitation in poor city neighborhoods. All of these terrific projects emerged. We had about a hundred kids that first summer, half from the city and half from around the country. And so, that was the beginning of Detroit Summer,

and our first volunteer was Julia Putnam, who had a different name then, and Julia went on to become an activist and an educator and then of course founded--co-founded--the Boggs School. So, that's kind of one element in the trajectory.

Another element is the Allied Media Conference because many of the people at the Allied Media Conference came to Detroit through Detroit Summer and helped shape Detroit Summer. And, as we--as Detroit Summer evolved, it became more and more media conscious. In fact, it became Detroit Summer LAMP [Live Arts Media Project], and then LAMP kind of folded into really working as an arm on the AMC. And then last summer, one of the LAMP young people now is organizing Detroit Summer 2.0. So, they did community organizing and storytelling and murals last summer, and that group is now organizing for this summer. So, Sterling Toles says Detroit summer is not an organization, it's a permanent address. You can't get rid of it. So, there it is. And, it's coming back. It's continued to evolve through those different formations, but I think if you look at something the Detroit Narrative Agency. People like ill [Weaver] were very influenced by Detroit Summer. Jenny Lee and Mike [Medow??] and Sterling are all folks who have been part of that, and almost any organization now who...that someone who's between 30 and 40 in it in the city, they had some connection to Detroit Summer.

[1:32:27]

PB: I've noticed that in conversations.

SH: Yeah, they're like everywhere. Yeah.

PB: I keep entering into conversations with folks, and it's constantly popping up. So, thank you for sharing more about this genesis and evolution.

SH: Jimmy [Boggs] spoke at the first two opening ceremonies and did workshops at the first one. He died a few weeks after the second summer. It's almost all volunteer. Little bit of money here and there, but I don't think our budget was

ever more than 30,000. Even now--in fact, I know it's not now. It was a really important example of the kind of intergenerational organizing that combines action and ideas.

PB: So, starting to wind down, could you briefly--and, again, we're asking everyone this question to get almost like a survey of grassroots organizers in Detroit. What's your vision for the future of this city?

SH: Well, I just wrote a paragraph about if you come to Detroit right now, you can go into a bakery that is socially responsible and tries to be right with the community and the neighbors and the employees and the earth, and you can have coffee that's locally roasted and have honey that comes from our bees, have salad that we've raised ourselves, and charge your phone from the windmill that is making sure we still have some form of electricity, and you can ride a bike that the kids have rehabbed just down the street, and you can get water from the pedal--have you seen these pedal bikes that purify the rainwater as you peddle them? Invented by our high school kids?

I mean, these are the kind of city that combines the capacity of people to develop themselves as we develop the things we need for life is what I think Detroit will be. And, I think we're on our way. I think you can see that in lots of places already, and it's just a question of expanding those things, but I think we also have to say it has to be predominantly an African African city because that is where we get the cultural memory of what it means to survive with dignity and to share. So, that's the essential element that makes Detroit different.

[1:35:26]

PB: And, I guess to conclude, are there any memories... Or, would you like to speak to the legacy of Mama Lila Cabbil in the city of Detroit?

SH: I will give you the legacy of Lila that I gave at her funeral--I admired that the night before they invited the community to speak--and also because it ties with

Detroit Summer. I met Lila through Alice Jennings, who I also hope you're interviewing. It was right before we had started Detroit Summer. Lila had us--it was through SOSAD. Jimmy and Grace and I went and did some workshops with the Rosa Parks Institute, young people, and that's how I met Lila.

But shortly after Detroit Summer started, maybe a little bit later, Lila--well, this was when George Bush was president. It was the first Iraq War where a group of young men called the Lost Boys of Somalia--do you know who they were or have you read about them? These were young kids who--several different families, lots of brother connections, and they were about fifteen or so and had walked from wherever their home was to some UN refugee space. It was a journey of about a thousand miles. They had no shoes. They had literally just the clothes on their back, but they kept each other alive and together, and they wanted to come to the United States, and nobody would sponsor them. They couldn't get people to say, "Come here. We'll make sure you have a space."

So, Lila and the Rosa Parks Institute did, and they stepped forward and said, "We'll take these young men, and we'll help figure out a place for them," and she not only welcomed these young men, but then she created a public forum on war and what it means to children because George Bush was going to go into Iraq with this war. So on the eve of the war against Iraq, she holds this public forum and showcases the young men from Somalia to be able to talk to those who wanted to about what war had meant to them. And, it was an incredibly moving and thoughtful and energizing gathering that Lila created, and she had tremendous courage to do it because she was standing against US government, against George Bush, and against the military at a time when--a time when people didn't want to do that.

I remember Lila for lots of things. We worked together on the Water Warrior effort. But, I think she wasn't only an activist--not that that's an only--but she was a woman of extraordinary courage and willingness to do things when other people weren't.

[1:38:45]

PB: And lastly, was there anything that we might have missed or were there any questions that folks in the room might have?

SH: I just want to tell you one story about foreclosures.

PB: Please.

SH: One of the groups that's part of the Boggs Center network is Feedom Freedom Growers, which is down on Manistique on the lower East Side, and they've been there for many years doing their garden. Their tagline is "Grow a Garden, Grow a Community." They've done a lot of work with art. It's Baba Wayne Curtis and Myrtle [Thompson-Curtis], his wife, and their family. Wayne's a former--well, he says there's no former. He *is* a Black Panther, a very old one, and he is an artist.

Anyway, they are at Feedom Freedom Growers, and one of their neighbors was being foreclosed on in a complete mess up of her relationship to the bank. She had money and was trying to buy her house from the bank, and the bank wasn't selling it to her. It was a long fight.So, Wayne and Myrtle get the idea of creating an eviction-free zone, and Wayne builds a fence around the house that's to be foreclosed on, gets all the kids and local artists, and they paint on the fence the words "Eviction Free Zone," and they put a big fence, Black Lives Matter. They put pictures of kids, and then they invite the coalition. The Detroit Eviction Defense Group comes, and they create this strong barrier for the city to come in and get rid of the house. We held concerts there. We held art shows there. We got as much activity there every day and as much publicity as we could. There were a few things written up about it. But in the end, we won.

And, those victories were really important, and they are important because people not only used imagination and declared, "This is ours," but they put their bodies on the line. I mean, people stood so that the trucks couldn't come and take stuff out of the house and that worked, which what the Detroit Eviction Defense folks are doing all over the city is essential to help people stay in their homes, especially because now so many people are being taken out illegally now because

it’s all being messed up by the powers that be. So, I wanted to leave you with that story of the eviction-free zone and to think about that capacity that--and strategy that--Wayne brought to say, “This is ours. You don’t get to decide what happens here.”

PB: Thank you so much for...

SH: Sure!

PB: Thank you for spending your day with us, sharing all of this with...

SH: So, thank you for doing this. This is wonderful that you’re doing this.