

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

Alice Jennings

Interviewed by

ORIANA YILMA AND PETER BLACKMER

May 17, 2019

Detroit, MI

Narrator

Alice Jennings is a life-long Detroiters and a lawyer and activist for many causes. Influenced by her father's union activism in her early years, she soon became involved in civil rights and anti-war activism while in college at Michigan State University. She has worked on issues of environmental justice, housing, privatization, gun violence, workplace discrimination and sexual harassment, and many other issues with such organizations as Save Our Sons and Daughters (SOSAD), Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice, and Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management (DREM). Currently, she is focusing on water issues with the People's Water Board Coalition.

Interviewer

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

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

Abstract

Alice Jennings discusses how her interest in activism and social justice work were influenced by her parents and grandmother, her early activism in college in the antiwar, Civil Rights, and Black Power movements, why she became a lawyer, and the many issues that she has worked on over the years. Topics include the privatization of city assets in Detroit, emergency management, bankruptcy, gentrification, the mortgage and foreclosure crises, educational issues, workplace discrimination, environmental justice, and global warming. She speaks at length about the water struggle, including how she got involved, why water impacts public health, the structure of the People's Water Board, its approach of litigation, legislation, and agitation, and the challenges of working with such a large coalition on water. Major themes include the interconnectedness of social justice issues and how many stem from putting greed over people, why lawsuits make a difference even when they aren't successful, the importance of bottom-up approaches to activism, the necessity of persistence over time and across generations to make change, and her belief that young people will continue the

movement. She also discusses her relationship with activists Grace and James Lee Boggs and Rosa Parks and the legacy of Charity Hicks and Lila Cabbil.

Keywords

1967 Detroit rebellion; Antiwar movement; Bankruptcy; Black power; Charity Hicks; Civil rights; Climate change; Detroit, Michigan; Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management; Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice; Education; Emergency management; Environmental justice; Foreclosure crisis; Gentrification; Grace Lee Boggs; Gun violence; James Lee Boggs; Labor unions; Lila Cabbil; Paradise Valley; People's Water Board; Privatization; Public health; Rosa Parks; Save Our Sons and Daughters; Sexual harassment; Urban renewal; Vietnam War; Water affordability; Water shutoffs; Workplace discrimination

Restrictions

None

Original Format

.mp4 file

Transcript

Transcribed by Annika Peterson on March 12-18, 2020

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Alice Jennings, interviewed by Oriana Yilma and Peter Blackmer, May 17, 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.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 17, 2019 with:

Alice Jennings [AJ]

Detroit, MI

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

AJ: My name is Alice Jennings. I live in Detroit, Michigan. I have been involved with multiple organizations over the years, but I'm primarily working with the People's Water Board Coalition presently as well as, of course, the national work that's being done around water, and it's an organization we created called the National Coalition for Legislation on Affordable Water, and that's NCLA-Water. [laughs]

[0:00:45]

OY: Could you describe your neighborhood when you first got to Detroit?

AJ: Well, I was born in Detroit, born in Detroit in 1951. My mom and dad were both from the South. My mother was from Louisville, Kentucky, my dad from Nashville, Tennessee, and they had moved to Detroit for opportunities. So, I grew up right over on the East Side of Detroit. I went to school there, and I'm still here. I...I love Detroit. Yeah.

[0:01:20]

OY: How has the city changed since how it was when you first come here?

AJ: Well, it...so the cl...the school that I went to...the neighborhood... It's a working-class neighborhood with people who worked in the surrounding plants. There were different industrial buildings almost on every corner. Everybody had a job. My dad was a Teamster. He was in the union, so some of my earliest organizing activities were walking the picket line with my dad with some of the issues that were going on with the Teamsters at the time. Yeah.

[0:02:02]

OY: Could you talk a little bit more about how that impacted you first becoming active in struggles for racial equity and social justice?

AJ: Well, I think the union movement in the city--well, you know, Detroit is the union capital, or certainly was at one time. And so, when you consider the fact that my dad believed strongly enough to march the picket line and not get paid and take his kids to the picket line with him [laughs]--and there were eight of us, so he took a few of us. Some of us didn't want to go, but I always liked to hang out with my dad, so we would walk the picket line together. And I believe later as I moved through life and went to Michigan State [University], there were activities against the war, the Vietnam War at that time. I got involved in those. There were other issues of Black power. As the Black power movement began to develop and surge, surged on campuses as well. I was involved in various Black student union movement groups, and so I believe that basic foundation from my father--and I think what was really important, too, was in 1963, my dad took me to the march here in Detroit as we marched down Woodward with Martin Luther King. And so at a very early age--I was probably 12 or 13--I got to know about civil rights and human rights and what Martin Luther King stood for, which I don't think I would've come into contact with that type of power dynamic at that young a age were it not that my dad was involved in the union movement.

[0:03:54]

OY: Other than your father, what or who have been some of the greatest influences on your activism and legal practice?

AJ: Mmm. My mother. [laughs] My mother and father, of course, were really very important to our development. We were always to not center ourselves around ourselves but what we could do for other people. That would be the measure of our life would be what we had done for others, not what we did for ourselves. That was my mother's teaching. Of course, my father, he was with it.

My grandmother. She lived with us. She was...she had a disability. She was completely blind, which I think caused her to be a lot more introverted and very intellectual about everything, and so I sat at her knee and learned so many things like going back like when she was a kid, which now would be over a hundred years ago [laughs]. So I'm carrying a lot of her knowledge that she really tried to impart to me, and I have my granddaughter with me here today because I want her to know what her grandmother, grandfather, what we live for. And so, they were earlier influences.

Then, Grace Lee Boggs and James Lee Boggs. I met Grace and Jimmy in--Boggs--in 1986, and we were involved at that time in a movement called Save Our Sons and Daughters, or SOSAD. That was a community act--organization that came to be because so many young Black children were being killed at the hands of each other, not the quote-unquote [air quotes] "white man," but we were killing...the young kids were killing each other. So, the community came together. Clementine Barfield, her son at age 16, Derick Barfield, had got shot and killed by another young student at Northern High School. We created both a adult version as well as we had a student version of SOSAD and that went on. Was on the board for about 12 years involved in a lot of community activities where we did forums, we did teach-ins, we brought children together, we did restorative justice workshops, and that's when I got to know Grace Lee Boggs and James Boggs very well.

From that, Grace and I began to work on environmental justice. And at that time, we worked with an organization we helped create also called Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice. Some of you may remember that name because it's still

in existence. So, quite a bit different from what it was then because it's very grassroots. It's now grown to a point where their major corporate sponsors and others are working with Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice, but one of our first victories was shutting down the incinerator at the Henry Ford Hospital, and they were burning blood products, body parts, and other things, and we shut them down and worked--from there, we worked on the incinerator for many, many years. That just got shut down--it was a big victory--earlier this year after maybe 30 years of work.

So we did that, Grace and I, and then we also were involved with the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center and that we helped create. I was on that board. I was on DWEJ's [Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice] board. And many...when the water issue came along, it was so natural that I sat in my community, I'm thinking, "How in the world can somebody not have clean water? How could they not have running water? How can they shut water off to babies and people who don't have the ability to even maybe get out of the bed because of disabilities?" And so, we pulled together a team: Marilyn Mullane, Kurt Thornbladh, Mark Fancher. We brought in lawyers from all over the country, and it became known as the Lyda [v. City of Detroit] Pro-bono Committee, and that was more recently in 2014.

I also worked with Rosa Parks, Mrs. Rosa Parks. The Institute [Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self Development?] reached out to myself and to my partner--I haven't really talked about the law, have I?--reached out to myself and my partner Carl Edwards, who is also my husband, and we got to know Mrs. Parks and she...I...she allowed me to travel with her, so I remember sitting across from her in a Lear jet going to Louisiana, and we were going to Louisiana and I was thinking, "Wow, I'm on this Ford Lear jet, and I'm suing Ford for all kind of discrimination," and I thought that was the funniest thing. So we went to Louisiana together, and we travelled different places. What a human being, another fantastic human being.

[0:10:03]

OY: So going back a little bit, can you talk about your work against privatization in the [19]90s with the Coalition to Stop Privatization and Save Our City?

AJ: Okay. Now, that was James Boggs and Grace Boggs. At that time, the city of Detroit was falling into the hands of contractors, and it was happening at such a rapid speed. It's...it's basically where it is now, you know. We're a contract city. People were losing their jobs. Detroit is a city where City of Detroit employees were making up large segments of the community because they would buy homes, they would pay taxes. So once that was no longer happening because you got 2,000 city employees laid off, well, what you gonna get there is you're automatically gonna have a decrease in the tax base.

So, we fought hard to keep AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees] employees involved. Grace and Jimmy, we had work--we worked with about 10 presidents of the AFSCME unions to make sure that we knew what the needs were. We weren't coming up with the ideas. It's one of the things that Grace and James Boggs taught me is that the leadership has got to be indigenous. It's got to come up from the ground. Can't be top-down. It's got to be you're sitting there, you're just a facilitator to help assist, but the ideas are coming from the people who got their water shut off, the people who are sitting around the incinerator with asthma with little babies knowing how to plug in their machine so they can breathe, and they're only two or three years old. That's where the answers are gonna come from, and that's what I learned working with the...the great Grace and James Lee Boggs, for sure.

[0:12:22]

OY: So where do you see connections between the earlier efforts working against privatization of city assets and services, between that and what happened with emergency management and bankruptcy?

AJ: You're really dealing with the same fundamental problem of poverty, the rich getting richer, and whether or not people have a sense of human--humanity about themselves. And what we found as we went deeper into the issue of the

emergency manager and we went deeper into the issue of the water, we...you can't talk about water without talking about housing. You can't talk about housing without talking about food. You can't talk about civil rights without talking about justice. You can't talk about crime without talking about punishment. We found the interconnectedness, intersectionality between all of those issues. So as we work, those of us who are community organizers, activists, I'm trying to raise up my children, my grandchildren to have that--like my grandmother and mother taught me to care about others, that's the interconnectedness is passing on that legacy of love and hope and that it's bigger than you, it's bigger than me, and...but together what the community can do is an extraordinary--what they did, they shut down the incinerator finally, how 'bout that.

[0:14:15]

OY: So as far as when the time comes to defend against issues that are impacting multiple areas like food and health and race and class, how do race and class impact access to legal defense and support in Detroit?

AJ: Well, right now, I'll give you an example. I've been a lawyer on the side of people all of my life. I have never represented one corporation in my life. I started with worker's compensation where many times people who are in employ--in an employment setting are injured, and once they're injured, they become damaged goods. Now, they could be injured physically or they could be injured mentally, doesn't matter. Certainly, what I have found is that corporations then want to cut that person off. Fortunately, there are laws against that. In the civil rights, we were involved, our firm, in one of the historic--in fact, it is still the largest verdict for race, age, and gender discrimination against Detroit Edison in the year 2000. It was a class action. We've been involved using...really using the law as a tool for social justice change. We have been involved in a lead case on the East Side of Detroit where a lead smelter was poisoning children very perniciously, taking away their brain intellect. We filed a class action for that.

I am presently lead counsel in a case on the East Side of Detroit where they have decided--and when I say 'they,' I mean those that are in power to make these decisions--have decided to have an industrial park right in the middle of a

community. In fact, it's the community I grew up in, Concord and Van Dyke and Harper Street. And so, when my former neighbors who I was still in touch with called me and said, "Look, we're over here sucking up all these fumes. There are explosions. There are fires. There are trucks rumbling up and down our street. Can you help us?" Well, I got a team of lawyers together. We went in, and that case is called Jackson et. al. versus Strong Steel et. al. There are four defendants in that case. We don't always win, but we certainly make an impact on those that are in power.

[0:17:06]

PB: Could you talk a little bit about what... Like, I'm curious in lawsuits and legal challenges that aren't successful in getting the verdict that you're seeking, ...

AJ: Yes.

PB: ...how...like, can you talk a little bit more about what those impacts can be even when the verdict isn't in your favor?

AJ: Yes. Particularly with the water case--and...and I've always had a saying that the victory is many times in the fight itself because for power to cede even that there's organizing taking place there's certain concessions that are automatically made. We had that happen with the water case where at first they wanted half of the bills. Some people owed 2,000, 3,000 dollars. They didn't have 1,500 dollars sitting around! Immediately, the city of Detroit made the rule that you had to pay 10 percent, not 50 percent. Still too much for a lot of people, but it was an immediate reaction. We said, "There's no notice here. You're not giving people enough time to make it down to the Water Building and...and make a payment." So, we got a seven-day notice tacked on the door. All of that happened even though, ultimately, the judge did not give us injunctive relief that we were looking for in order to plan what we call Affordable Water Now ordinance.

But, from that loss came a group of people who had been pulled together. People's Water Board went back to 2005. Lila Cabbil was the--now recently passed away--my dear friend and colleague in the water warrior work. Charity Hicks, who's also now deceased. These women were working on water back in the day. Marian Kramer, Maureen Taylor from Michigan Welfare Rights. All the work that I do as a lawyer is connected to people who are...are organic leaders in their community or in the field that they've chose. So I would say that, too, what came out of that even though we lost, we started working--okay, litigation, legislation, aggravation. We were gonna do all three. So, we went to Lansing [Michigan]. Lila Cabbil and I, we were sitting around one day. We said, "We need to get a bus and take it up to Lansing and really talk to those legislators and let 'em see we need some laws!" 'Cause one of the things the judge said is, "There is not a law on the books that I can use to fix this problem for you folks, even though I really think that people will die because they will not have clean, safe, and affordable water." So with that said, we got busy on legislation. Then, we agitated because we went up, and we rallied, and we...we...we fought. We did. We went into offices. Some people went and got arrested. I wasn't one that got arrested, but many got arrested up in Lansing, so that was the agitation.

Then as it...Lila began to see a vision of all the groups coming together around water, and she started working with Flint [Michigan]. Well, we were working with Flint already, but she started going up on the Enbridge pipeline, Nestle's. I mean, we're talking about upper Michigan. She started looking at Pontiac [Michigan]. She started looking at Saginaw [Michigan], and so that very last meeting or coming-together that we had with Lila Cabbil before her untimely death, we had water warriors from all over the state, and I remember Lila said, "And I'm gonna call these people and I'm gonna..." She always had this little notebook, and she would have this notebook and she was [mimes writing], "I called them, I called them, and we're gonna do this, and we're gonna do that." And so, it takes that kind of organizing out of a...a loss! And we took it, we took lemons and we tried to make some lemonade, and a whole lot of other people were there squeezing the lemons to try to get the job done.

And right now, Jud--rather, Senator Stephanie Chang is our champion on water legislation state-wide. Federally, we have created, with an expert named Wa--Roger Colton, a federal piece of civil rights legislation on water affordability, sanitation, and accessibility, and we're looking for our best sponsor for that. We

were previously working with Congressperson John Conyers, and he retired recently, so we're looking for other champions. And, I just think that you just keep going. You flow--no pun intended--but you...you keep going with...you flow with it, and that's what we're doing now.

[inaudible whispers]

[0:23:09]

OY: Going back--'cause we will come back to water later, definitely.

AJ: Okay.

OY: That's important to keep talking about... But, can you walk us through some of your legal challenges to emergency manager laws and struggles against emergency management and bankruptcy proceedings?

AJ: With the emergency manager, I did not file any litigation myself. That litigation was filed mostly with the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] and with the National Lawyers Guild. They filed those--Julie Hurwitz, Bill Goodman--they filed those cases with the emergency manager. What I did with emergency management was get involved with other activists with an organization called DREM, Detroiters Resisting Emergency Managers, and our primary work there was to do education around emergency management 'cause people didn't know what it was all about, you know, and we were able to do some really good organizing so people then knew that it was something, this emergency management that was affecting people of color more than anyone. When you looked at the cities that got emergency management, they were cities of color, they...whether they were here in Detroit or they were in Flint. Flint never got an emergency management. The school system did. They eventually did get an emergency manager, I think, and then there's just--they were all Black!

So, we looked at that and we saw something being terribly wrong about how is it that only the Black cities are getting these emergency management folks who basically want to give the city away to people in power and people who have money, take it away from the people. What we're gonna experience here in Detroit the next 20 years will be a whole-sale removal of people who have been here for the last 100 years who look like me and you. There...there's an orchestrated move to remove people of color out of the inner city and send them wherever they want to go. So if anybody's got property in the city, pay your taxes, hold on for dear life because it's turning into a city that has been--I won't say gentrified, but re-gentrified. Yeah.

[0:26:09]

OY: How has Detroit changed since emergency management was imposed, and how have your communities been impacted?

AJ: Well, it's changed because now it's very clear we're corporate Detroit. We are not the people's Detroit when you see the moves that have been made by some of the large corporations, when you see [Dan] Gilbert, the real estate tycoon, and some of the others, when you see [Mike] Ilitch being able to build the stadia and get all of these huge tax cuts, free property. Right now, the land bank has 50 percent of all of Detroit property in it. That land bank is gonna be used--and I've had all kind of stories come to me that people have tried to get property, people of color have tried to buy property from the land bank and can't do it and that, in fact, they're making sure they give the property or let people they want to buy the property at the land bank. This is part of the problem.

But if they have 50 percent of all the land already--in fact, the great Chokwe Lumumba, who was my classmate at the law school here had, you know...you know, free the land, and he recognized as did a lot of his colleagues that he worked with from the ground up that the land and property ownership is important to establish the lines of power in any community. And as we lose the property, people of color, most of our wealth is in property. We don't have trust funds. We don't have big bank accounts, but what we have always had in Detroit historically was a home. Then, of course, zoom, they came in with the different

loans that they were giving. You pay--here, let me give you 50,000 dollars, and you pay a little bit here and there, and then all of a sudden, the monthly charge goes up, you know, 400 percent or something. So, guess what? You just lost your house, and it's been the in the family for two generations. And so, then the people who get it, they don't take care of it so it deteriorates, and it's a cycle. So now, the cycle's going around to, okay, we want the property. Let's keep the property, but you go to Taylor [Michigan] or Warren [Michigan] or someplace else. So, the community is being in upheaval, shifting of the community.

[0:29:11]

OY: Switching back to the water struggle, ...

AJ: Mmhm.

OY: ...can you explain just how you first got involved with the water struggle?

AJ: Well, that's a story. [laughs] I first got involved in the water struggle because Charity Hicks, a known water warrior, was arrested, right, in 2014 when they start to--Homrich started doing the first water shutoffs, and they were moving into neighborhoods as if it was a military conquest, and these trucks were literally getting out, the folks were jumping off the trucks, shutting water one house, jumping off the truck, shutting water off the next house, so that whole neighborhoods were not..no longer living with clean, safe, affordable water. So, Charity Hicks came out of her house, saw that her pregnant neighbor was about to get her water shut off, ran out, and said, "Don't shut off the water." She then goes in the house and calls the police, police come, arrest her, and take her to jail.

So Lila Cabbil calls me--that's why I said this is a story. I have a lot of old lawyer stories. I can't help it.--[laughs] So Lila calls me and says--Saturday morning, right. I'm having my first cup of coffee--"You've got to come down to the jail because Charity Hicks has been arrested." And I'm like, "I don't do criminal law. I don't know the first thing about doing criminal law, Lila. What am I gonna do?" So, I

said, "Call John Royal," and I gave her a couple more criminal lawyers. So, she called him. John was someplace, and--but John said, "Tell Lila go on over there, and then we'll figure out what we're gonna do." So, I get there, and I go in, and I go in and see Charity, who... She's barefoot. Her foot had been cut. She was medically out of control with her diabetes, and she's...and she's sitting there and she's saying, "And we need to do something about the conditions in there!" She's worried about everybody else, I'm worried about her!

And, long story short, we sprung her from jail that day, and that's how I got to meet Charity Hicks, and we became fast buddies. And about a month later, she went to New York for a conference, and she was hit by a car and was killed. Yeah. That's the Charity Hicks, water warrior extraordinaire. So, that's how I got involved because it was to honor her memory, and even though I only knew her for about two months, we were very close in that time, that spirit and time that we came together, and I have fought very hard for water. And, because it's just the right thing for a human being to do if you care about other people.

[0:32:25]

OY: So would you say your role as a lawyer, an attorney basically, helps protect people who aren't protected otherwise, and how would you say that it helps?

AJ: Well, I would say yes.

OY: [laughs]

AJ: I was a social worker before I became a lawyer. I was a school social worker. I went to Michigan State and worked on my master's degree. I thought I wanted to do that kind of work, and then I saw that it was a band-aid approach. Social work is a static to me. They're good work--oh, some of my best friends are social workers. They do great work in a therapeutic, trying to fix things. But to make cutting-edge social justice change, you really...the law is a tool, whether it's the legislative law or it's a law that you're fighting in the court. It... [hits hand with fist]

it's got a punch. You don't win very often, especially nowadays, but you win enough to keep the juice of humanity flowing. Sometime you just can build a trench legally, that's all you can do, to keep it from jumping over and just hurting people. [hits hand with fist] You know, when we fought the incinerator 15 or 20 years ago, one of the things, we didn't have a lawsuit then. We weren't able to bring the lawsuit then, but what we were able to do--again, social justice change even when you don't win--they put in a two-and-a-half million dollar scrubber in the pipe, in the smokestack. And had they not done that, maybe more people would have died of asthma attacks, maybe more children.

So, you...you try to make a difference where you can. And you know, you have to engage in some self-care, too, and I'm telling more and more young activists that you...you got to take some time to rejuvenate and take care of yourself as well 'cause you can run yourself right off a cliff.

[0:35:00]

OY: Well, you spoke a little bit about this before, but could you elaborate on the origins of the Lyda [v. City of Detroit] case?

AJ: Well, the origins of the Lyda case was [laughs] I was sitting around talking to Marilyn Mullane of Neighborhood Legal Services, and we were actually working on the Flint--the Highland Park [Michigan] water case. We were talking about filing a lawsuit against them because they had just shut off water to Highland Park, and they weren't sending out any bills, so people were sitting there using the water and accumulating bills, but they were not based on any real objective metering, and we were talking about that when they start shutting off water. And so, I said, "Let's get a group together and let's fight 'em!"

And it was actually Jerry Goldberg, who's a lawyer buddy of mine, his wife Chris had challenged the judge. She had been in court, and she said, "Why don't you do something about this water? This is ridiculous!" So, she told Jerry, "Why aren't you guys filing a lawsuit or something?" So, Jerry said Chris went and challenged the judge, and the judge said he was gonna have the city of Detroit come to court

Monday and talk about what had happened. And I said, "Well, what? Well, this is Thursday. Let's start writing a complaint!" [claps hands] We wrote a complaint in like two days. We filed it at three o'clock in the morning, and we went to court with the complaint having been filed about three o'clock that morning, and I walked up to the clerk and I said, "We're here 'cause we just filed a case for the people, citizens of the city of Detroit. Will the judge hear us?" So, she went and talked to Judge, said, "Sure, Miss Jennings. Come on up!" So, [laughs] that's how we end up with the Lyda case. We had 14--I think 10 people. At that time, we probably had about 14 lawyers. We ended up with about 30.

Yeah, that's how that got started, just running our mouths, talking, and saying, "This ain't right. We cannot let this go down on our watch." And we...instead of me going home and watching House Hunters or [laughs] something else, Rachel Maddow, I sat and wrote that complaint along with Jerry and Marilyn Mullane and Patricia Jones out of Seattle [Washington] at that time--out of Washington, D.C. at that time, and we...we got busy. Kurt Thornbladh, yeah.

[0:38:02]

OY: Could you describe some of the most...

AJ: Okay.

OY: ...memorable or impactful moments from the proceedings?

AJ: One of the--I think--the saddest moments of that proceeding was when the witnesses got on the stand and talked about what it was like to live without water, and we had about eight witnesses who testified, and it's like they'd go--would go to their bathroom or to their kitchen, and they would think they still had water. You know how you keep do [mimes turning on faucet], and then you keep turning on the faucet, and you don't have it. One of the mothers had eight children living in the home, and those children were her children and her daughter's children, and they were sending the little kids to school with dirty clothes and not being

able to wash up except out of a water bottle, and they were being called stinky and smelly and thi...this just, you know, tears your heart apart. And the judge, you know, to his credit, he said, "Hey, that's horrible, and these things are terrible, and they may cause death! But this is a bankruptcy, and we must have money." Judge Rhodes, Steven Rhodes. So, he's retired now.

But...so, those were sad moments, you know. Those were very sad moments. [pause] But, we kept going. We had Roger Colton, the expert water authority in the country on affordability. He testified very excellently. He said if you get a water affordability plan, it's gonna bring more money into the system. You will not have to cut off people at all. That's what he said, and so that's our theory and our theme for the national legislation. You will get more money into this process if you allow people to pay based on their ability. That's what water affordability is. If you make 10 dollars a week, then a certain percentage, four to five--three to four to five percent should be for water. So--but if you only...if you make 10 dollars a week, eight dollars shouldn't be for water, and that's what was happening--is happening. Well, not was, *is* happening.

[0:40:57]

OY: What impacts did the Lyda [v. City of Detroit] case have on the broader water struggle?

AJ: I think it had a tremendous impact because after the...we also had the United Nations come to the city. They spent four days with us. They went to neighborhoods. They went to community meetings. The rapporteurs made a finding that it was inhumane to not have water in a city the size of Detroit--or period, for anyone! And so, we took that and began to build movement. The movement escalated. When I say 'we,' I mean People's Water Board, [Michigan] Welfare Rights, We the People. These are all organic organizations. Circle of Blue, different places. We're now doing a film called Water. We've got a small grant, the People's Water Board and the National Coalition for Water, and the film has been being edited now, but it...we...we filmed in six places, California, Detroit. We...we filmed at...on the Navajo nation. We filmed in Kentucky. We filmed in Alabama in Lowndes County.

I mean, so we're...the expansion of this...and then we have been involved with others who are doing the same thing but in their own circles, so we're trying to tie it all together with...so that this movement, water movement, becomes something where we will actually get a--like a civil rights law that says in these United States there should not be a human being that has to go without water because they can't afford it, shouldn't happen, should never happen.

[0:43:19]

OY: Could you give your analysis of the Headlee Amendment and the legal grounds for the water affordability plan?

AJ: Absolutely a crock of stuff. Headlee amendment, the Bolt [v. City of Lansing] case, none of it is really applicable to whether or not water affordability ordinance or a state statute or anything else comes into existence. It really was a red herring that the city of Detroit used to try against--to...to go against us. In fact, it had been analyzed back in 2005 as not applying. It was analyzed by us, as the Lyda [v. City of Detroit] plaintiffs, to say why Bolt...the Bolt case and the issue of taxation and whether it was a tax or it was a fee, all of that is just not true. That's what I think about that. [laughs]

[0:44:17]

OY: Could you explain the connection between the water shutoffs and the tax foreclosures and what that connection tells you about the impacts that intensive austerity politics in Detroit?

AJ: Wow, you really did do a lot of research here. Here's what happens with water: if you get a water bill stuck on your property and it becomes so big, you can literally have your house foreclosed because of the water bill. That house then becomes the property of Wayne County or whoever's gonna sell it, and so you can

lose your house. That was our fear, and we did file a lawsuit with--Marilyn [Mullane] and I--did file a lawsuit along with a lawyer named Vanessa Fluker against Highland Park, and we're...we've settled it through a consent judgment where all of the bills that go backwards will not have to be paid, and then we're working on an ordinance for affordability. So, you know, I think that you really have to look at it in a way that housing--and that...and that was the fear in Highland Park was that they were gonna suddenly say, "Oh, here's your bill. It's 5,055 dollars. Can you pay it? If you can't pay it, we'll just attach it to your property, and we'll take the property." And so, we were able to stop 'em from doing that in Highland Park, but in Detroit it's still happening. Still happening.

[0:46:04]

PB: I have so many questions I want to ask about the water struggle, ...

AJ: Mmhm.

PB: ...but I'm just gonna keep it to one 'cause this is Oriana's show.

AJ: Mmhm.

PB: In the areas around--I'm thinking about Mayor [Mike] Duggan, and he consistently heralds himself and others in his circle herald him as like this champion for Detroiters' rights because of that moratorium that he declared on water shutoffs.

AJ: Mmhm.

PB: Can you talk a little bit about what actually prompted that moratorium...

AJ: Yeah.

PB: ...and why that happened?

AJ: Well, what prompted this is we filed the lawsuit, and there was extreme organizing around it. There was a huge rally held in downtown Detroit at...where the nurses--I forget their name, but--the nurses were here for a big conference, and they came out and they rallied with us, and then right around the same time, within a week or so, we filed the lawsuit. He did it because it looked really bad. If they had not gone from 50 percent to 10 percent, 80 percent of the people in Detroit would have had no water. It was just that simple.

But, what we really found is that the shutoffs were taking place in neighborhoods that were not as [air quotes] “acceptable” as others, neighborhoods that maybe they wanted to [air quotes] “clear out” anyway. They never shut my water off. I wasn’t paying my bill half the time, or I’d pay it whenever I felt like it. Nobody ever came and put a blue stripe in front of my house, but I live down the street from where the mayor lives, so it was not a neighborhood that was unacceptable. So, they were doing it in a lot of ways to push people out, and Mayor Duggan has no right to take any type of credit for only half-doing a job. Because if his--they called it the ten-ten-ten plan, the three-three-three plan, or something--if it was so effective, why were people still getting their water shut off? To the tune of thousands even after he did the moratorium. You’ve got an effective plan, you wouldn’t expect to see that metrically. It couldn’t have been that effective.

[0:48:56]

OY: So, when things like the plan of adjustment and Detroit Future City--the map for the improvement of the city--neglect the voices of the people, how do the organizers from the grassroots respond?

AJ: Well, there’s an organization called the People’s Platform, and the People’s Platform is just a really grassroots organization that really does get like what

a--community benefits agreements. That's one way they have worked to try to bring justice in a...in unjust cir--set of circumstances. There was the 15 dollar movement, 15 dollar an hour movement, workers who fought against that. When you get that type of injustice, what you will see is it...there will be a...a uprising maybe within the area around it or the people who are most impacted, and there's generally, or can be, a reaching-out to place--to organizations like Michigan Welfare Rights or other grassroots organizations that can come in and get involved--ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union], NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], Legal Defense Fund, the Legal Defense Fund arm of it--to get involved and to have some meaningful work move forward.

[0:50:39]

OY: So, can you elaborate a little bit on, like, sort of how that relationship works between grassroots efforts with, like, things like demonstrations and protests working in tandem with legal work?

AJ: No. [both laugh] No, I will. I always said that I thought it was more important for me to maintain my legal...my license as a lawyer. I think that there have been times I could have been arrested for being certain places with certain activists, and I refrained from doing that, but it hasn't refrained me from sitting on committees or being in meetings or talking to my friends because my friends are organic leaders, you know, and...and people who are being affected. They beco--like Nicole Hill, who was one of the plaintiffs in the Lyda [v. City of Detroit] litigation, became a huge activist on behalf of people. She now travels and is involved in the water warrior movement, as is Roslyn Walker, and these are people tomorrow I would expect for Lila Cabbil's memorial part of her service, memorial service, will be at the grassroots area that we frequent over on Forest in the Unitar--former Unitarian Church now called the Commons. They'll be there. These are...these are my buddies. And so, I don't necessarily differentiate in a...in that way.

[0:52:37]

OY: Do you see any connection between the water crisis, inequitable development, the destruction of the public school system, and the foreclosure crisis?

AJ: They're all connected to two factors: poverty and profit. When you start putting profit over people, you get things like lead in the water system and the school system. Helen Moore had a--for those of you don't know Helen Moore, she's a long-time activist in educational issues here in the city, and right after we learned that so many--80 schools had water and/or copper in the piping, this was unfathomable. How could they not know this? Children who get lead in their system between the ages of--either the mother's pregnant through age five or six, they actually experience a loss in their cognitive ability. They are more prone toward violence. They're more prone toward not being able to hear. They're more prone to have medical conditions. This is huge to know that this is going on. And even as we sit here, I know that they have not taken the steps necessary to fix those problems. I happen to know that for a number of reasons because I'm involved with people who are involved with those things. So, part of it is just staying involved with your people, with your community, and then if...if it's time to sue somebody, then they know the...the type of lawyer or lawyers they have to bring into the struggle.

[0:54:47]

OY: What would you consider to be some of the greatest successes and shortcomings in your legal cur--career?

AJ: I think I got so much joy out of working the case in the class-action that was involved on the East Side of Detroit where the lead smelter had been there, lot...a lot of satisfaction from working with the water case. Still working with it because of the legislation. There were a lot of defeats in individual cases of race discrimination and discrimination based on disability and age, gender. One of my most disappointing cases, even though it created law in Michigan where women--and men, too--can sue for individual liability against a sexual harasser, the client that was involved in that case was so very damaged because of the way she was treated. And not--it was enough the way she was treated, sexually

harassed and touched and everything at Ford Motor Company, but after that, the way the legal treat--system itself treated her. That was...that was a disappointment. That was a low point. But whether--we get from it...we got a case that says if you sexually harass somebody in the workforce, even if the company doesn't know, we can sue you--supervisor, manager, director--can sue you individually. So.

[0:56:56]

OY: What are some of the most important lessons you've learned throughout your legal career?

AJ: That I don't know anything! Every day's a new day. If I'm not on my computer looking up the last case that came down the chute, I am in trouble. I cannot rest on any laurels of what was going on in this city 25 years. I've been practicing law for 41 years. Whatever happened back then in 41 years or 30 years or 20 years or yesterday means nothing because what comes out of the Court of Appeals or the Supreme Court or statutory authority that's being decided up there in Lansing is what's gonna rule the day for the future. So, you have to stay current.

[0:57:47]

OY: Where have you seen young people engaged in organizing work here, and how do you think more will become active and involved?

AJ: There are young water warriors. I...I know that. I've seen them. I've seen 'em in Lansing. I've seen 'em in Detroit. I know there's an active movement at Cass Tech[nical High School] where teenagers are taking up the water movement. I forget the name of their group, but I was on a panel with them recently. I see young people pushing back against the society that's unjust. I see it in the politics. One of Lila Cabbil's key issues was voting rights, and she traveled with Mrs. [Rosa] Parks for many years, and she had this thing she carried around, and then she

would unfold it and it was this beautiful voting rights thing that had different information about Mrs. Parks and voting.

And, I see that young people want to vote. They want to make a difference, whether they're Democratic or they're Republican or they're Libertarian. I see they...I think young people are understanding what's going on. We're moving toward fascism in this country with a president [Donald Trump] who is a fascist, and the moves that he is making now against people of color, people who are asking for asylum by becoming American citizens, the whole way in which there are those who have and those who haven't, and if you don't have any, you don't need to get none. And in fact, why don't you get out of my face. In fact, beat 'em up. There's something wrong with that, and I think young people are reacting to that in a visceral way where they really want to fight that type of injustice, and I do see it in Detroit.

I saw it with the dol--15 dollar movement. Most of the people in that movement are young people who work in fast food industry who are making less than 15 dollars an hour, and so that is probably a really good example of where I've seen it.

[Jump cut]

Being kicked out of your house or going and helping people who losing their homes, I see young people involved in that as well. Poverty work, the Reverend [William] Barber's work on the poverty on a national level, I see young people involved in that, the anti-poverty movement.

[1:00:41]

OY: Can you talk about connections you feel to Detroit's rich history of progressive Black lawyers and movement lawyers?

AJ: Sitting right here. We just lost the Honorable Damon J. Keith. Damon Keith was a jurist extraordinaire, but before that he was a lawyer extraordinaire, and he believed in justice, and, you know, you hear people who become lawyers who say, you know, "I love the law." You love the law? What do you mean by that? How could you love the law? And so, I don't think it's that they...they love the law in words, it's that they love what they can do and the fight they can have by taking the mantle of the law and hammering against injustices, and I believe that Judge Damon Keith was one of those individuals who saw and loved the law in that way. And so, I would...I would say that, yeah.

[Oriana and Peter whisper inaudibly]

[1:01:59]

PB: I want to come back to your work with DREM [Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management]...

AJ: Yes.

PB: ...'cause through all the conversations we've been having with people, a lot of folks have... It's becoming clear to me that that was kind of a springboard for a lot of folks...

AJ: Mm.

PB: ...that spun off into different movement work.

AJ: Mm.

PB: So, could you talk a little bit more about your roles with DREM, maybe like reflect on some of the successes and impacts that DREM had, and maybe what wasn't as successful in the struggle and coalition-building in that way?

AJ: Yeah. I think DREM was a process that developed directly around Detroiters resisting environmental--resisting the emergency manager law, and people came from various sources, and we really tried to name it so that if you saw the name you knew exactly what you were doing. Think it had another name where we were--I...I remember the naming ceremony and what it took because we wanted to draw people. It was probably--remember getting the orange t-shirts. We started having rallies and...with t-shirts and DREM and movie and...and it almost naturally went into the water movement, but I recall that Lila Cabbil and I worked to pull together a couple of forums out in the community. We had one that was focused on youth that was held at Northwest Activity Center. When I say 'we,' I mean the committee, but Lila was always instrumental in being the committee chair, so I was always her...her jump-seat person, and so we went out, had one there, and we had one also out at the community college right there on Conner on the East Side, which a lot of times things are done, but they're done either downtown, on the West Side, so we wanted to do something that would be in the East Side area. And then, we were downtown at the Wayne County Community College, and there were things that were done in the community, and so I think that kind of...I think some of us maybe hadn't been involved in [coughs] coalition building for a while, and those of us who were lawyers had kind of gone back to practicing law.

And then all of a sudden, the water movement sprung up, and there we were, and Lila and I kind of transferred ourselves over to that because of Charity Hicks. [takes a drink of water] DREM started writing papers and doing things. Tom Stevens--trying to think who else was actively involved--Shea Howell from the Boggs Center, and I...you know, they...we all came together around the issue, but then once the bankruptcy happened, it was a...a thing done.

[1:05:32]

PB: So on the topic of the bankruptcy, could you talk a little bit about or explain for us how the...the Water and Sewerage Department got brought into the bankruptcy proceedings?

AJ: We knew that the bankruptcy was a hoax, okay. There was a...a paper written by Demo[s], and I'm trying to remember the name of the gentleman that wrote it [Wallace Turbeville], but it was a reality check for those of us who maybe thought the city really was bankrupt. What...it was a mess-up-to-set-up situation where Detroit was not given millions of dollars worth of their revenue sharing. Then, there was the whole issue of paying the [interest rate] swaps. There had just been this huge amount of borrowing that had taken place by Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, and the...and they were real bad deals that required a kicking-in or a triggering payments at a level that was just astronomical. And instead of them challenging that deal, they decided to do the bankruptcy because then they would have the ability to bring in the water department, which was the one part of the city of Detroit that could make money. If run effectively and efficiently, it could make money--and in fact, it's making money now, but for the Great Lakes Water Authority. So, they put it in there, into the bankruptcy. Everything was in the bankruptcy, but they took it, and they start having secret little meetings about the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department that were really meetings that were meant to regionalize the water in a way where Detroit had owned the water system for hundreds of years.

And so, the outshoot of that was that part of the bankruptcy when it was...in...in addition to taking away just huge amount of wealth from the working class that would be called City of Detroit employees, cutting their pensions, cutting their annuities, cutting just everything, wages in some cases, medical insurance, they decided to take the Detroit Water and Sewer Department and this long-term lease, which in the language of that lease says it could go into private hands. Parts of it or all of it could become private. So--and Lila, this was one of her pet peeves. They took the Water Department so eventually it could be privatized so we would end up with one of the big privatizers that would basically be making money off of selling water. We have no public interest.

Our...our theory with the water was its...people need water and everything else, but the reason the public water system came into existence is because of illness.

You do not have clean, affordable, assessable water in neighborhoods, they will fall to disease and various conditions. Not to mention that if you're not hydrated properly, the body reacts with the kidney, the lungs, and other parts and can do end organ damage to human beings. So, this was always our theory. So here we go, you're just gonna make money off of it? So, that's what happened. That's how it got into the bankruptcy. The meetings were secret. People were not allowed in those meetings. It was a...it was a bad time for us.

PB: So the...

AJ: Still is.

[1:10:08]

PB: The dominant narrative about privatization of city assets is that it's more efficient or more effective delivery of needed goods, like the private sector is more capable of running institutions. How do you respond to those kinds of narratives? Like, you know, like what are the dangers of privatization of the Water Department?

AJ: Well, they've done studies, and some of the--Veolia [Water Technologies] is all over the world running water systems, and when you look at Veolia, maybe that first year, maybe half of the second year, but by the third year, they're running all kind of deficits. The money is...more fees are needed. You know, it becomes a 100 percent money-making initiative, and there's no connection between the people running that system and the people who are using that system. There is no relationship with--the reason it's a public water system is because the public is being protected from certain things like high bills, like disease, like the type of degradation that goes on when you don't have water in huge swaths. We're now studying whether or not water left in pipes for periods of time and then you get your water flowing again, that water starts degrading and the chemicals and the viruses or whatever's in there, then you start getting your running water again, you start drinking it or using it, and then you're ingesting either part of a rusty

pipe, you know, that got softened up while it was just sitting there in the...waiting for the water to flow again. So, it's all kind of issues.

[1:12:18]

PB: When you're describing that inefficiency of private takeovers of public assets, it's...I'm hearing what happened in Iraq, ...

AJ: Mmhm.

PB: ...what happened in South America at the hands of multinationals and the U.S. government. Like, what's the connect--where's Detroit's place within this broader scope?

AJ: It...it's...it's greed. If you've got something you can just turn the faucet on and get money and, oh, that's some nice money, I'm making some nice money here. Oh, well, let's make a little bit more. So, instead of putting--just like what happened in Flint. What would it have cost them to have just cleaned that water the way it was supposed to be cleaned by dropping in the chemical that would have isolated the tarnishing and ruination of those pipes? But they decided not to do it in part because of cost, and so when you start making decisions for the public based on money, profit, and not on people, you gonna run amok, and that has happened in every single country that Veolia and all these other big privatized companies that run water, they run electric--It doesn't matter what they're running. You're gonna run right into a situation where there's no humanity in that process. No neighbors. They don't know these people. They don't care.

[1:14:01]

PB: And on the flip side is not knowing people, there's no accountability.

AJ: No accountability. That's it! None.

PB: So, one of the things that I'm...I'm not clear about is the structure of the People's Water Board, who's involved. Like, can you give us a glimpse into like the internal structure and operations of People...

AJ: Oh, it's so...individuals. It's organizations. We have a website that lists over 50 organizations that take part in our weekly--our monthly meetings every second Tuesday at the Commons. [Michigan] Welfare Rights, We The People, different churches, Jews for Justice, you name it--Wayne State has some students there doing research, Food and Water Watch, oh gee...gee whiz. Lo--the website has a lot of people, and...and they come when they come. Ev...everybody's not there every time. We've had two huge summits where we've brought in people from--one was from all over the world. We had 14 different countries there talking about water. That was the summit at the [Hotel] St. Regis, the first time we did it. Then the second time, Lila [Cabbil], again, key organizer for that, along with Sylvia Orduño--I don't know if you know Sylvia, but these are organizers who pulled all that together, Maureen [Taylor] and Marian [Kramer].

And then two years later, we did part two. We did legislative and legal analysis, brought in lawyers from all over the country who were working on water. Colin [Bailey] was there, Bailey from California. We had Patricia [Jones] there from Washington. We had Monique Lin-Luse who was there from New York from the Legal Defense Fund, and they all gave and shared. We had mothers who had children who were taken away from them in part because of water issues. So, it...it's been very comprehensive.

[1:16:46]

PB: Who...with your experience with DREM coalition and the People's Water Board being a coalition, what kind of lessons have you learned about coalition building, what that takes, what the...what the struggles are, and what the impacts can be of coalition work?

AJ: Well, people don't always agree on everything, okay. You know, you got people who want to see a lawsuit, and you got people who want to do legislation, and you've got people who just want to get in the street and agitate. You've got people who just want to talk. They don't really want to do anything. [laughs] So, you know, you've got to have good, strong leadership, and that good, strong leadership has got to be a core group of people, and it directs, and people come in and out as they can 'cause nobody's being paid. It's all for freebies. [laughs]

[1:17:51]

PB: Kind of like on this topic of lessons learned...

AJ: Oh, lessons learned. Oh, lessons. The people united will never be defeated. The people united will never be defeated. This is my mantra in life. If I let go of that thought, that people getting together at the most basic core of their humanity could not make a difference, I'd be through. I would be in Grandma's rocking chair. [laughs]

[1:18:33]

PB: I'm thinking about--it's like with that in mind, right, like I'm thinking back to that huge mobilization and organization around water, [loud crashing noises in background] like at the time you're describing is when the [United Nations] rapporteurs were coming and...

AJ: Yes.

PB: ...people like Mark Ruffalo and other celebrities were here...

AJ: Mark was here, yes.

PB: Like, there's this hu--like the...the eyes of the world are on Detroit.

AJ: Yes.

PB: And yet, outside of that moratori--that brief moratorium, the water shutoffs are persisting. So, what are we to learn from that about what the possibilities of this kind of organizing are? Like, wa...was there anything that could have been done differently or could still be...be done differently?

AJ: I think that endurance and that the fight continues. It's...it's got to be there. I mean, at first, they were caught off guard. They didn't--when I say 'they,' I mean the government, the powers-that-bes--they didn't expect, I guess, that anybody would care! And so when they had such a huge outroar--pour, they changed their policy somewhat. I think there's still the need for that to fight at every angle and to not give up. I mean, I remember John Conyers, Representative Conyers, [hits arm of chair to emphasize each word] fought for 15 years to get Martin Luther King's birthday. He introduced the same bill for 15 years until the sun, the moon, and the stars came together, and we now have Martin Luther King's birthday as a national holiday.

I think what water is gonna take that same persistence. It may not be in my lifetime. It may be my granddaughter and some of you who carry the flag across the line on this. It's not something--civil rights wasn't [snaps fingers] overnight. People fought and they fought and they fought, and then the right moment in time came when certain historic achievements could be reached. So I mean, we're in the trenches everyday, and I look at it like, at this point in my life at age 67, I may not be here when we get across some of these finish lines. I may not be here when this society recognizes that in order for one person to have a...a home and to have water and to have good medical care, we all have to have it.

And so, I believe, though, with the young people I'm talking to now, that's a real possibility. I mean, the young people now are thinking like, "I don't want to live in

a society that's all I got all my stuff, and I look over here and nobody--the people over there don't have nothing. I don't want to live like that! I would rather not have all my stuff, but other people could share." I think that that kind of thinking is happening. Maybe I'm being foolish, but I...I really think that in...there are pockets in this country where there is a possibility that there could be a movement for justice in such a way that people are not just trying to go for themselves. I certainly hope that is true, that I could vision that for this country and for the...the world. I mean, I'm like one of those kind of people who dream like that, that, you know, everybody should be treated right and humanly.

[1:22:40]

PB: What you're saying is making me think about the writings of Dr. [Vincent] Harding and his emphasis on visioning and hope and raising questions about advanced ideas about democracy.

AJ: Yeah, the beloved community, Reverend Harding--and I met him, got to talk with him. He and his wife were dear friends of Grace and James Boggs, and we'd sit around the kitchen table and talk that talk, and he was a visionary in a lot of ways, as was Grace and Jimmy, and he believed in the beloved community. You can't get to a beloved community unless you have people who are facilitating a loving process, and he saw that as being his life's work. Yeah.

[1:23:35]

PB: And where do you see--I mean, you already mentioned that, like, yo...you're encouraged by some of these younger...this younger generation and some of the analyses that they're reaching, but if we're thinking specifically, where do you see like the greatest hope for this kind of facilitation of love and community or different visions for the future taking place right now?

AJ: It's always gonna come from the sources that are in conflict. I mean, it's always gonna come where there is some inhumanity that's taking place, whether it's with

the prisons and the young Black men and women being locked up for having a little bit of marijuana, where if you were in Ann Arbor [Michigan] 35 years ago and you could have a whole bag of weed, those kids were fined five dollars. And...and yet, people sat in prison for years. When that kind of dichotomy, that kind of injustice, that kind of imbalance is addressed, I...I think people are seeing it more and more now. I think the computer and the Internet is helping to facilitate that, but I just...I see it wherever I go when I'm in organizing spirit, and I saw--I've seen it in Lansing, I've seen it in Detroit, I've been up to Flint, I've seen it there, I've seen it in Pontiac. I've seen it all over, and I haven't been on any university campuses lately, but I'm hoping it's happening on the university campuses, that people are taking it up.

We have to shut this school [Wayne State University] down. That's why I re--coming in here, every time I come in here, I'm like, okay, y'all gonna arrest me now? We locked the doors and wouldn't let the professors leave for several hours, and I was fortunate to become a lawyer because they wanted to charge me with kidnapping and...but a professor named [Edward] Littlejohn made sure that he talked to the dean and said, you know, what you all did there was wrong. You bring these Black folks in and Hispanics and Latinos into school, you tell 'em they're gonna be lawyers, and then you flunk 'em all out? So, we fought to have at this school a professor, a dean for students who needed support, whether they were white, green, orange, it didn't matter, and to keep as many people of color at this university as could be possible. So, you know, I'm happy to say that I didn't go to jail, and I didn't spend time in prison for that event in my life. I think it made a difference. I've known several of the people who've been in that position here at the law school, but it sometimes is something like that. And there were only a core group--John Royal was one of them, if you know John Royal from the National Lawyers Guild--and some of us radical-thinking law students were involved, but I think there are people like that right now that are around.

[1:27:24]

PB: I want to take us back just a little bit--this is a little bit of a tangent--but we're talking before about displacement and driving people out of the city. Do you see--or what kind of connections do you see between this more recent onslaught

of displacement and like thinking back to the [19]50s and [19]60s of urban renewal in Detroit?

AJ: Well, it was actually called by the people in the neighborhood urban removal, and it happened in Paradise Valley. It happened wherever they built the freeways. They would tend to go straight through the Black community. I don't think you see any freeways go cutting through Grosse Pointe [Michigan]. You don't see any freeways cutting through any of the other--Farmington Hills [Michigan]--not in a way that it goes right through a neighborhood. That's what was happening then, and they were taking prime property of communities, which had real communities! I mean, we had grocery stores, we had banks, we had different kind of bakeries and drug stores, right there, right there on Concord Street, right at the corner of Miller. You could go walk up to the grocery store. By doing some of the things that they did to our communities, they bifurcated us in a way that is...we're still feeling.

Then, of course, the rebellions of 1967 came, and then after that there was a hands-off approach to Detroit for 30 years, 40, almost 40 years after [19]67. It's only now that the gentrification is occurring, and then when you look at it, it's happening only in certain spots, maybe a little seeding of pilgrims around the city in some of the neighborhoods. Unfortunately, it turns into a Black-white thing. It turns into a Hispanic-white thing. The...the...the good stuff, you know. Everybody wants to be close to downtown now. Before, not so much. It was called the Cass Corridor. It was where the prostitutes and people who were alcoholics kind of walked up and down the street and slept on the sidewalk and nobody wanted to necessarily live down there. They might go down there, some of the johns, to pick up a prostitute or something, but now it's what's hot for property ownership. The cost...I mean, the cost of living down there has gone sky-high.

Some would say it's progress. My thing is, yeah, nobody's mad at you because you want to do and do...push...have progress, but what about the people who were here, who stayed for 40 years and kept this city going? Where's that commitment? So. That's what I see. There could be as much development as anybody wants. Where is the master plan to make sure people who have been here and given and created the diversity and the commitment to everything, where are...what are you

gonna do for those people? Or what are you gonna let them continue to do for themselves?

[1:31:20]

PB: When you mentioned--well, moving on to talking with Dr. [Vincent] Harding and kind of made me think of connections between Dr. Harding and Charity Hicks, ...

AJ: Mmhm.

PB: ...and Bill Wylie-Kellermann told us about--and I think some...some others have as well--of being in St. Peter's the night that Charity Hicks...

AJ: Waged love.

PB: Were you there that night?

AJ: No, I wasn't. I had been at the event earlier that day, and I had to go back and write a brief or do something, but Lila told me about it. It was just an extraordinary spiritual event as I understand this. People looked back and talked about it, you know, later. It was her last time with her...her friends, and she seemed to be overcome with something, and she spoke about wage love. And so, I just wasn't there, but it was certainly an event that's been talked about very much. Yeah.

[1:32:29]

PB: I want to ask one more question, and then I'll turn it back to you. Your granddaughter is sitting here, an aspiring lawyer.

AJ: Uh-huh.

PB: What advice do you want to give to her as she is embarking upon this fut--this future legal career?

AJ: Well, I want her to be Cameron. I don't want her to be me. She can't be me. I can't be her. I wish I could be her all over again so I could do it all over again, but I can't. And so, she's gonna have to come to terms with each--and this was one of Grace [Lee Boggs], Grace's--she lived to be a hundred--her favorite saying. Each generation, out of relative obscurity, must define its mission and either fulfill it or betray it. And that was by a Black psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon, French psychiatrist. And I believe that's true! I mean, I'm...I'm sitting here. Water is--and civil rights and environmental justice and all of those things have been on my plate for 41 years. There will be an issue of the complete and total annihilation of this world as we know it with the issue of global warming, and the activism that is going to have to come into play to get that in motion. I know, it's...it's happening now, you know, with the icecaps melting, the floods, the extreme weather that's taking place. I think for the generations that are coming up, you know, we're dealing with some catastrophic things that could potentially happen if the activism...it's gonna take activism 'cause, you know, some people don't believe it's even real, so it's gonna take some real activism to get on to that.

OY: What...

AJ: Do your thing, Cameron, do your thing! [laughter] Don't let Grandma Alice tell you what to do or how to do it! 'Cause you're gonna have your own ideas, much better than mine, I'm sure.

[1:35:15]

OY: What is your vision for an equitable society in Detroit?

AJ: An equitable society in Detroit, there's something called a master plan. Detroit has had it for years and years, and yet the master plan is not created by the people. It's created by a...a very high echelon of administrators and planners and so forth. Why not have people from the communities sit on those master plan committees? When it's being thought out what is gonna happen here, what's gonna happen there. To have them involved in the very essence of their city and the governance of that city as well as what it looks like, how it appears, very important to have input from people who are affected. When you start, again, top down, doesn't work like that.

[1:36:23]

OY: And who else do we need to speak to?

AJ: Who else do we need to speak to? We need to mostly speak to ourselves. I always think that we got to first start here, look at the person in the mirror--I forget who made that song. Anyway...Michael Jackson. Okay. [laughs] Start with the man in the mirror, the woman in the mirror, and then from there, it's your community that you've got to feel that you're a part of before you can go to Mike Duggan or anybody or the governor or to the President of the United States. You don't know who you are and what you're about, what your community is about, you don't have anything to say, really. You just talking. So, I would say start with you, and it all comes from there. If you've got your head on straight without making any judgments for the people, then it'll work out.

[1:37:32]

OY: Is there anything that we missed that you want to get on the record?

AJ: I just think that this global warming is an existential threat to our country, to our world, and we got to get hip to it. We gonna be sitting up here doing whatever

we're doing, and the...the...the world is warming at a alarming rate, and if we don't get with it--and it's gonna be up to you younger folks to do this. You gotta make this a priority because it won't--human rights, civil rights, water rights, none of that, if the earth temperature warms to--the earth's temperature warms to the point that it becomes an existential threat. So. But I'm not a negative person! I think people gonna come together around it, and you're gonna fight it. That's gonna be one of your challenges, one of your defined challenges.

[1:38:40]

PB: And then, lastly, could you share with us maybe some reflections on Mama Lila's legacy or what...

AJ: Oh, yeah.

PB: ...like current or future generations of organizers can learn from her body of work?

AJ: Lila's body of work is so extensive. We...we found, some of us who had thought we knew her very well, she had worked in areas of working with children with medical disabilities or physical disabilities, she had worked on the issue of racism and confronting racism and what it takes to confront racism, she had worked for many years on water, and she had worked for many years on poverty, and she had worked on housing, and she's a person who held her faith very dearly. So, she traveled in her church circles. So, Lila leaves us a legacy. Many years ago, it was a term used for men, and they called them Renaissance men. What does that mean? Renaissance man was someone who had multi-facets, multi-talents. Well, Lila was a Renaissance woman, and she was gifted beyond belief in her ability to talk to people on a human level. She didn't talk down on people. She didn't talk through people. She was... When she was with you, you thought you were her best friend in the world. It was... [laughs] It was funny, at her memorial service, everybody thought they were like Lila's best friend, you know, and then everybody else found out Lila had a...a whole bunch of us best friends because she was so human and so caring.

And, I think that what her legacy is that you can work very hard on issues and get social justice change. She worked on food justice, too! I forgot that one. And so, each piece that she bit off, there's a Lila mark on it where she was there working diligently and with intentionality. She was an intentional organizer. She wasn't someone who just came to meetings. Between that meeting and that next meeting, she was intention--intentionally following up. She'd call me, "Hey...hi. It's Lila." [laughs] And she'd say, "You know we've got to do so-and-so and so-and-so." And I would say, "Yeah, Lila. I started it, but I'm not finished with it. When do you need it?" And she'd say, "Just get it to me by tomorrow." [laughs] And so, you know, that's the kind of person Lila was and her spirit is with us.

The last conversation I had with Lila, we were laughing and carrying on. She had just visited her daughter in Dallas [Texas], and I--she was talking about moving to Dallas, and I said, "Oh, Lila, you can't leave us! You can't leave us here in Detroit. What we gonna do without you, Lila?" And she said, "Oh, don't worry about that. I'll be with you no matter where I am." So, I let...that's my last piece on Lila. She's still with us, her spirit, her commitment. Similar to Charity Hicks. They're still with us. Yeah.

PB: Does anybody else have any questions they want to ask? Cameron, you want to ask anything?

Cameron: No. [laughs]

AJ: [laughs]

PB: Thank you so much for sharing with us.

AJ: Oh, well, thank you. It's very gracious of you to have me here, really appreciate it. Okay. Okay.