

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

Monica Lewis-Patrick

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER AND ORIANA YILMA

May 24, 2019

Detroit, MI

Narrator

Monica Lewis-Patrick is a cofounder and the CEO and president of We the People of Detroit. Monica moved from the Appalachian area of Tennessee to Detroit, Michigan in 2008 and immediately started organizing for quality public education in Detroit. Since then, she has continued organizing, expanding her focus to issues involving emergency management, the Detroit bankruptcy, and water shutoffs in Detroit. Under Monica's leadership, We the People of Detroit has spearheaded the exposure of the racial implications of the water shutoffs through their mapping project "Mapping the Water Crisis: The Dismantling of African-American Neighborhoods in Detroit" released in 2016.

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, Monica Lewis-Patrick shares memories of her entry into Detroit organizing as well as her mentorship by JoAnn Watson that continues to inspire her. She discusses the events of the bankruptcy as well as the onset of emergency management and its impact on Detroit. Monica discusses the creation of We the People of Detroit with a focus on their unique intergenerational organizing approach and its impact in the realm of water organizing. Monica shares lessons she's learned about the importance of establishing trust within the community and the power of counter-narratives to transform our realities.

Keywords

Antonio Cosme; Aurora Harris; Bill Wylie-Kellermann; Cecily McClellan; Charity Hicks; Claire McClinton; Debra Taylor; Detroit bankruptcy; Detroit Water and Sewerage Department; Detroit, Michigan; Emergency management; Flint, Michigan; General Baker; Gloria House; JoAnn Watson; Labor unions; Linda Campbell; Phyllis "Chris" Griffith; Privatization; Public health; Rhonda Anderson; Russ Bellant; Tawana Petty; Water shutoffs; We the People of Detroit; We the People of Detroit-Community Research Collective; We the Youth of Detroit

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Transcript of interview conducted May 24, 2019 with:

Monica Lewis-Patrick [MLP]

Detroit, MI

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

MLP: [laughs] Oh, my name is Monica Lewis-Patrick. I live in the city of Detroit [Michigan]. Affiliations, organizations... My organization is We the People of Detroit, and affiliations are numerous. Oh, Jesus. Part of the National Committee of Healing Our Waters Great Lakes Coalition. I'm a member of the People's Water Board. I'm a member of All About Water, the state chair of the Michigan Water Unity table. I am a member of U.S. Human Rights Network, a member of the Inter-Americas Council for Human Rights [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights?], a member of the World Water Board [World Water Council?], [pause] a member of the writing of the Lead and Copper Rule for the State of Michigan at the University of Michigan Water Center. [pause] I mean, that's all that I can think of right now. [slaps leg] I'd have to just give you a resume. [Oriana and Monica laugh] I can't keep up. It's 13 of them altogether. [slaps leg]

[0:01:25]

OY: Could you describe your neighborhood in the city when you got here?

MLP: Oh, wow. [pause] When I came to Detroit in 2008, I'd just gotten downsized from my job up in Tennessee. The city was dealing with educational issues. So, what we were seeing was there was a battle around mayoral control and giving away more power and governance over the school system to the mayor. And, I

had just left the state of Tennessee. And being a former educator in North Carolina and Tennessee, I know first hand the importance of a public education, a well-ran public education, but a public education nonetheless. And, to come to Detroit and see that as amazing as this city's history was and as rich as this culture was to know that there was not a library in every school, and I'd come from the hills of Tennessee, the Appalachian mountains where the poverty is pervasive. To not see art and music and cultural activities in a city that's so rich in culture and music not in every school is just so problematic to me.

And for us, we were super blessed. We lived in Lafayette Park, which is where I live now. In Lafayette Park, my daughters were able to get some of the best education in the state of Michigan. They attended Chrysler Elementary School. They attended Cass Tech[nical High School]. They attended University Prep [Schools]. So, some of the schools that are of higher caliber, but we were only able to take advantage of those things because I had relationships, you know. But, it was through leveraging those relationships that also led me to understand that it wasn't just about my children getting a quality education 'cause they're going to live in a world with other children. I care about all children getting a quality education. And so, I got in the fight. I wasn't here, what, six weeks, and I was in the middle of the fight for quality education and the fight against mayoral control.

[0:03:29]

OY: How has the city changed since you first got here?

MLP: The city has changed in several ways. You've seen a diluting of Black power both politically and economically. You've seen more of a drain and ciphering off of assets and resources, definitely a strong transition from this long narrative of failed Black leadership and corruption to now you hear a lot about this manufactured narrative of come back. For me, it almost sounds like Make America Great, you know. It has that same feel to it. So when they talk about come back, they're only talking about the 7.2 miles of downtown, but what they leave out is that 80 percent of the contrived bankruptcy was on the backs of pensioners. A large portion of the population in the city of Detroit are elderly persons that

stayed in the city when others abandoned the city. So, your largest tax base in the city is usually your elderly. Your voting bloc in the city is elderly.

And so, to know that history and be a part of family that really was blessed when Detroit was in its heyday and to know the richness of the culture and sacrifices that have happened here and then to see it sort of pimped for the wealthy, for billionaires and millionaires to be able to subsidize their development projects on the backs of those that stayed and paid. I've got a grandmother that uses a term, "It sticks in my craw." It just doesn't feel good to me to see that kind of assault and violence play out very openly. It's like being stuck up without a gun. You gon rob me and not even use a weapon, and that's what I see playing out over the last 10 years that I've been here.

[0:05:27]

OY: What does racism look like in Detroit today?

MLP: Racism looks like the ability to create a master narrative of failed Black leadership and then explain away stealing pensions. Stealing a Water Department, gifting away a public lighting system where you could've turned on 85 percent of the lights for two million dollars, but you give it to DTE [Detroit Edison Energy] and pay them 154 million. Racism looks like the ability to give up about 600 million dollars to a billionaire from your school aid fund and then allow the national narrative to be failed Black parenting in Detroit, that we don't care about our children, that we didn't invest in our schools.

Racism would look like being able to shut off over 142,000 households and then allow through a contrived bankruptcy the restructuring of the resources of that system. In 1955, you legislated the city of Detroit to build a system out to the suburbs because your wells were drying up and your citizens were getting sick from infectious diseases. And so, you force us to build this system. But then, we knew in 1955. The water director at that time said that the city would eventually go bankrupt if they were forced to build the system out. That has actually subsidized majority-white suburbs in their existence, but at the same time you

justify shutting off water in 126 municipalities. About 3.8 million Michiganders is who we built this system for, and then there's only two municipalities out of that whole service area that you shut off water to, and it's Detroit and Flint [Michigan].

So, racism to me looks like an issue I deal with everyday in this city. There's not one day--and my daughter's here. She'll tell you that I don't live and breathe how to get water to Detroiters. That's racism. So, you gon make me pay retail on water on a system that I've already paid for on my tax dollars to build, but then I'm forced by law in the State of Michigan to sell it to you wholesale. And then, you mark it up a hundred to a thousand percent and blame it on me. And, we tested it. We proved it. We actually wrote a book about it. It's called "Mapping the Water Crisis: The Disenfranchisement of African Americans in Detroit," and what all the data shows is that in this city there has been intentional spatial and institutional racism targeted on the city of Detroit by the state of Michigan, by surrounding counties, and also even in some instances by its own political leadership to extract away from a predominantly powerful Black city any power, any economic redress that it had.

[0:08:39]

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

MLP: [laughs; pause] Believe it or not, from the time I was in first grade until I graduated from high school, I was bullied everyday of my life. Everyday I went to school, couldn't go to the bathroom, couldn't go to gym. I mean, I could tell horror stories of something that happened almost everyday, and a lot of people didn't know that because my school was--there was only a small population of Black students. It was a large school with a large population, but in my hometown Black people make up less than four percent of the population. So, we are a minority. And then within that minority, I was a super minority because I was in some advanced classes and things of that nature. So when you're already marginalized, then that group of kids already feel oppressed, and what they do is any kid that they figure is different becomes the target of that, you know, that oppression.

So with that, I ended up being always--some teacher or someone, I would become their pet project to support or to motivate or to encourage, and I had a teacher by the name of Donella Ellis (??) who was in the middle of fighting the school system to keep Black literature and Black history. And, I had waited all these years to get to high school to take these two classes. They were something I was excited about because we didn't have a lot of cultural things happening in this very white southern town. And when Ms. Ellis said that we weren't going to have this class and that we needed to organize if we were going to change the situation, she really encouraged us to organize. And out of that organizing, she told us, she said, "It's not enough Black students to save the class. You've got to convince your white counterparts that they need this class as well, and if they're hanging out with you at games and hanging out with you at parties, what about convincing them to come and hang out with you in class?" And, we got our friends, a couple hundred of them, to sign up for her class and save the class.

And out of that, many of our friends then got active in the after school programs we had. We had a program called the Ebony Teen Queens and the Ebony Teen Kings. And so, white kids joined Ebony Teen Queens and Ebony Teen Kings which then, you know, made them involved in a lot of our cultural activities that we brought to the school.

And out of that movement work and seeing change happen in terms of just racial dynamics and relationships and then being able to like get together with the wealthy white kids and put pressure on the principal to create certain changes around policies, you then begin to flex your muscle and realize, "Oh, shit. We got some power." [laughs] You know, they can't just do whatever. Even as kids, we recognized that, and I think after that I never looked back. And, I think I made a decision after that I would try to fight for those that feel not acknowledged, not heard, not respected, not supported, and maybe it's been my own vindication from all of those years of feeling marginalized and not heard and really victimized in a lot of ways. And so, I choose never again to be a victim, and I choose as much as I can to find the superhero in everybody where I can. I don't believe everybody's innately good, either. [laughs]

[0:12:33]

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

MLP: Well, I just shared one of my teachers, Donella Ellis (??), was a big part of that. Probably the biggest influence, I would have to say, is my mom. My mom is a retired Master Sergeant from the US Army Reserve, 24 years. She worked her way up through nursing from a LPN [licensed practical nurse], RN [registered nurse]. She retired from the Veterans Administration after about 35 years. She was a union steward, so we spent a lot of time at union meetings, with her on picket lines. Organizing with the federal government's a little different than other organizing, so got to see a lot. Got to experience a lot of some of those backroom conversations, you know, 'cause you're the kid and nobody's paying attention and doesn't think you're listening, but you're listening to everything. So, I was that kid, too.

So, I think seeing her just fight so fearlessly, you know, and the same with the military. I mean, she took on the military when they were denying her and other persons of color their rightful promotions and ended up through a three-year process of investigating her unit and really bringing down some key figures where they were forced into early retirement. Some of them had to take demotions. And so, when you know that kind of grit and then she just so fly doing it, you like, "I want to be like that. I want to be that person, and I want to be somebody that my mom respects." So, I think that's another part that drives me is it's important to me that she and my children respect that I'm a good person and that I do work that's worthy and things that they're proud to be able to say, you know, "My mom and my daughter was a part of that."

[0:14:34]

PB: She sounds like a total badass.

MLP: Oh, she is. Oh, my God. [whispers]

PB: And, it's like the whole family.

MLP: You got to google her. I'm telling you.

PB: What's her name?

MLP: Her name is Sonora (??) Lewis, retired Master Sergeant Senora (??) Lewis. She also got her promotion--I just need to add that [Peter Blackmer]--and so did others. She got the others their promotion.

PB: That's so important to like--even though we are mentioning it in this conversation as like an afterthought, I think we need to be grounded in those too, right, 'cause we hear so much about the struggle but not about the outcomes.

MLP: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Well, there's all kinds of amazing outcomes that have happened, and she's one of them. You know that. I just think she's fought. But then, you know, you have to be reminded, and the activists remind you that when you fight you win. Sometimes, it's a long-projected fight, but you gotta fight.

[0:15:24]

PB: So, can you kind of walk us through the formation of We the People?

MLP: [deep breath] We the People of Detroit, it--as I mentioned earlier, mayoral struggle. I met Debra Taylor actually several years before when her nephew was involved in a criminal situation in Northeast Tennessee. He had been involved--and it's a long story, but I'll make the short part of it. He had been accused of killing a police officer in a high speed chase. So, my family got involved in actually court advocacy and supporting them through that case. It was a very racially charged case. And so, it was about a four-and-a-half-year struggle. And so,

out of showing up to court everyday, the judge and everybody just assumed these Black people would not come together with these people unless they were related. They had no idea that we were not related, didn't even know each other til that first day we came to court, but we just kept coming. You could even see that they were going to railroad this 16-year-old kid for something that really was an accident.

And so out of that, we became friends. And when I got downsized from my job, she invited me to come live with her and just get a fresh start. I was going through a divorce. My youngest daughter had just gotten dropped off on my steps. She actually is an adopted child. And so, she was eight weeks old, and I was finishing grad school all at the same time. And so instead of saying, "Should I have a nervous breakdown?," I decided, "No, I'll do something I want to do." I had always wanted to live in Detroit. Half of our family had moved here in the [19]50s and [19]60s. And so, it was a good opportunity for me to make a big city move, move from the South to the North, fresh start after a divorce. So, just looking for that clean palette and also knowing that I had a support system.

Then after getting my children enrolled in school and realizing that they were getting ready to take away parental input and really dilute it, almost as if you were handing your children over to this system, I met Aurora Harris because she was advocating for not only her child but other children with disabilities. We showed up that day in city council, and that's when I met Cecily McClellan, who was a labor leader in the city of Detroit but also worked for the Department of Health and Human Services and had designed the project inside of the Water Department that was actually working at that time to provide relief, but she was fighting because her grandchildren and her nieces and nephews were in the system. And then, the elder of our group--she's 88 years old--[Phyllis] Chris Griffith was fighting for her great-grandchildren, them being able to have quality education. And, we didn't really know each other. Debbie and I knew each other. And then, Chris and Cecily knew each other, and Aurora knew Debbie. But, we just sat together for about five weeks fighting this legislation and actually won.

But, it was out of that fight that it was really hundreds of us that began to mobilize around this issue, but the five of us stayed together. So, we stayed together, and we took on the charter issue when they decided to open up the charter during the

Kwame [Kilpatrick] incident. So, they opened up the charter to dilute more of our power and create districts. Then, we took up the issue of emergency management. And so, we fought that issue. We organized and created campaigns and really were successful in beating back emergency management. We won against Proposal [Public Act] Four, and then they came with Proposal [Public Act] 436, which just totally undermined all sentiments of democracy.

And then after that in 2013, Councilmember JoAnn Watson sat us down and said to us as a leadership team, "One of you got to run for public office. You got to take over. I'm about to retire," and she had asked Debra Taylor and Cecily McClellan and myself to all three consider to run. And, Cecily was fighting the city at the time to save the pensions and the jobs, and Debra and I were still working for councilmember. And if you work for Councilmember Watson, you know that there is no sun up or sun down. And so, we just didn't see where the capacity was going to come, and she decided, "Monica, you're it." So, I ran for city council in 2013. We were not successful in that, but out of ten candidates we came in five--fifth--and we garnered about 10,000 votes. And in the city of Detroit, they tell you not to even start a campaign unless you have 150,000 dollars. We had 10,000 dollars, and, with about 20 youth and about 20 elders, we almost won that thing. So, we're pretty proud of that as well.

[0:20:42]

PB: I want to come back to that a little bit, but I want to also ask about, like, what specific roles each of you played in getting the organization off the ground.

MLP: In terms of, I think, shaping our processes and procedures, we approach it like a Board of Mothers, if you will. That's been sort of what brought us together, and that's what keeps us together. It's a democratic process. In 2009 as we were moving through the bankruptcy and going into [20]12 and [20]13, all of us were still working. We all still had jobs with the city. Like I said, Cecily was working for the Health Department. Debra and I was working for city council for JoAnn Watson. Aurora, of course, was teaching at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. And then, Mama Chris Griffith was working for Cecily as a counselor in alcohol and drug treatment.

And so out of that in 2013, when Cecily lost her job because of the downsizing that happened prior to the bankruptcy, and then that meant that Mama Chris lost her job. It also meant at the same time that Aurora was seeing a reduction in her class hours, and so she was going through a financial hardship. And then, Debra and I had lost our jobs with the city. So whereas before, we were funding our own organizing work, and we were funding our activism. Any food we served, it was coming out of our pockets. Any printing that we did, we were putting our pennies together and making it happen.

But during the bankruptcy when we saw that the water was the target and the goal and that we were really looking at them strategically and systematically shutting off the water, that became an affront to everything that is holy and moral. It really did, but it--at the same time when we saw Charity Hicks--and I just think that's a name that everybody ought to know. When we saw Charity Hicks be arrested for just going door-to-door alerting her neighbors that they were in jeopardy of losing access to water and then be arrested and placed in jail, [pause] that to us sent shockwaves through an organization that is led by five Black women. And, Charity being the powerhouse that she was, we just felt like at that point that our bodies and our existence was under assault and that we had to go all just totally all out with using everything at our disposal to save ourselves, save our children, and save our community.

And, Councilmember Watson had told us a couple months before that. She said, "Nobody's coming to save Detroit. They're not coming," and she told us that we better deputize ourselves and be prepared to go way beyond even the care and the giving that women in this community have to do all the time just to hold it together, that we were going to see a time when water was going to be shut off, where housing was going to be compromised, where there was going to be no food assistance, there was going to be no healthcare, and that we were going to have to go back to the same methodology that allowed us to survive the Middle Passage and Jim Crow and slavery and all of the things that we had survived, that it had been the Black mothers that had been able to sort of hold us together, and we were going to have to do it again. And, we had no idea at that time that she was really prophetically, [laughs] you know. We were thinking she was speaking metaphorically.

And shortly after that, they started ramping up shutting off water, and we started mapping it and digitizing it and using GIS [Geographic Information System] mapping strategies to really drill down and bring together our own citizens, base allies, and friends and listening to some elders like Dr. Gloria House--Mama Aneb [Kgositsile]--telling us, "You know, all of these women are credentialed. Why are you looking outside yourself to get the academy to validate you and validate your trauma and validate these health impacts?" And so, she called us together when we created We the People of Detroit Community Research Collective and began to reach out to not only within our own network but then reaching out to allies that we had over years across the country. Because people have to remember under emergency management, any data that was produced at the universities could've been commandeered under Governor [Rick] Synder. So even though we might've been producing something that would've helped expose all of these inadequacies and inefficiencies and diseases and things that were health impacts that were created by austerity, you were being blockaded by federal--by state government at every turn.

[0:26:09]

So, we turned around and started building power outside the State of Michigan, you know, with national allies and family that may be in Alabama or Mississippi or somebody that you went to school with or soror that you had that now teaches at Georgia Tech [Georgia Institute of Technology], and we started using that network--and not using it so much in a formal sense. So, we never partnered with any university. We always partnered with a professor because we're trying to build relationships that go beyond institutions because institutions fail.

And so out of that research, we also then recognized that many of the circles that we're in, even organizing, are too old. If the youngest person in the room is 35, too old. So, we started challenging ourselves--because I'm the baby in the bunch, and I'm 53. [laughs] Too old. So, we started saying we needed something that we were nurturing in terms of youth leadership. So, we talked to--I talked to my daughters. Some of the other women talked to their nieces, nephews, and grandchildren and said, "What are the kinds of things that would make you

motivated to become active in some of the things that are happening in your community?" And, some of the feedback was, "We want to run our own programs. We don't want you old people telling us what to do." And then, what we talked about is: what does accountability look like? Because if you don't want us to tell you what to do, then if we're spending the money and investing in your projects, there's still got to be some accountability.

So, we created We the Youth of Detroit. It's a youth-leadership-led component of the work. It is totally youth leadership at its finest. We're part of the national network of YES [YES! (Youth Empowered Solutions)], which is really transitioning us out of youth development and into youth leadership. We have had 43 students come through that process in the last four years. We're looking to have our fifth class this year.

We also found out in that process that you need funds to do this work, and that crisis will not wait for you to figure it out. And so when we started to have to figure out how to get water door-to-door, what we did is we took Debra Taylor's credit card 'cause she's got the best credit among us, [laughs] and we took her credit card and charged about 5,000 dollars of water and wipes and sanitizer and things that people need when they don't have access to running water and sanitation. And, we got 8,500 dollars in 2014 from a small fund, a small grant, and that person told us at that time, "You guys probably need to get a 501 (c)(3)," and we saw that as something that was going to prevent us from being free, that was going to be really restrictive and modify our function. And so, we resisted that.

So, we still kept scraping by and having little small fundraisers. So, we raised 17,900 dollars in 2015. After that in 2016, we raised 49,000 dollars, and we got another small grant. Really, it was a big grant. We got 11,000 dollars from SDOP [Self-Development of People grant from the Presbyterian church], which was an international grant. And because it was international, it allowed us to get a lot of attention. But in 2016, the KIND foundation that make those really cute snack bars, they gave me a 100,000 dollar grant for being a kind person. And out of that--and that's all because of Debra, and Mama Gwen [Winston] wrote this very flowery response. And so out of that, we were selected, seven out of this large number of people. We got this cash grant, and what we know is that funders and foundations really don't show you any love or respect until you hit a 100,000

dollar mark. So, I donated 85,000 dollars to We the People of Detroit, which has been a...sort of catapulted us into another arena of funding which has allowed us now to be operating on around the tune of about 250,000 a year.

And so, we're really proud of the fact that we've been very transparent and open. Nobody buys us. We're unbought and unbossed. We tell funders all the time the things we don't like about them unapologetically because we want them to do better, and we don't take any money that we can't give back. And so, you know, I would just encourage young activists as you're doing this work being very committed to your values, not afraid to tell your truth, not afraid to embrace the fact that you do need resources, but you don't have to sell your soul to get 'em. And, you don't have to sell out your cause and your mission and community for them, but also being willing to go in the room and spend enough time staying in the room to educate that other person on the importance of the work that you're doing because we need the human infrastructure to be reconnected on these issues just beyond the issue.

[0:31:03]

PB: I want to step back just for a second and--we spoke with Reverend [JoAnn] Watson. We spoke with her. So, we heard a little bit about...

MLP: Is she not amazing?

PB: Oh my goodness, she's incredible.

MLP: That's the queen. That's the queen. [mimes bowing down to JoAnn Watson]

PB: You know, when we...we did an interview with her, we did it at the Bethel Community Transformation Center on Woodward at Pastor Aramis [Hinds]' place.

MLP: Oh, wow.

PB: And, I swear. We had her sitting up on the stage there, and you know those big old windows on either side of that big synagogue. It seemed like every time I finished asking a question and she was about to speak, the sun beamed.

[laughter]

MLP: I'm telling you she's amazing.

[0:31:42]

PB: So, could you tell us a little bit about how you and Deb started working for her, and what you learned from her? And, I'm particularly interested because I heard--I think Deb talked about this--with how she brought that knowledge of self and knowledge of history to the city council and what kind of impact that made in the work.

MLP: Oh, my God. [pause] I mean, you know, I got the chance to talk about her the other day, and I told folks, pound for pound, she is the greatest legislator that has ever existed in the city of Detroit. She has passed more legislation than any other legislator. In 2009, she was voted by Guardian Magazine as the most impactful municipal leader in the country, which should give everybody a glimpse into her brilliance. And so, when she kept seeing us show up at these meetings where we were just giving them hell--oh my goodness. When they started shrinking the amount of time that we could talk about an issue--you get like...you know, you've got like three minutes, you've got two minutes to talk. Well, we was giving them so much hell they reduced it down to 30 seconds at one point. You only had 30 seconds to talk.

Well, I mean, come on. You know, we're the mothers of all civilization. You can't stop us from talking 'cause all Black women gon do is coordinate their speech. And

so, we took speeches, and we cut it 'em up in 30-second segments. And so, we just passed the speech down. So, you only got 30 seconds. Hey, boom. And, boom. And, boom. And, we did that over and over til the point where it was so effective because it was so [snaps]. It was just like people looked forward to it. They were tuning in. They were calling on the radio station like, "Oh, you got to turn on the TV." I mean, it was that crazy. And so then, we calling the radio stations every morning. All of us would get on the phone every talk radio station in the city and give everybody like the morning get down like, "This is what's going down. You got to get to city council. Be there at 9 o'clock." Then, it started like, "Be there at 8 o'clock because they're going to stack the room to keep you from getting in the room." I mean, it was that kind of like back-and-forth strategic kind of like warfare going.

And so, Councilmember--we were down there. Oh my God, we was kicking their butt on something. And so, I had been working on a contract with Pro-Literacy Detroit where Deb and I were basically getting young people prepared and people in general prepared for jobs and contracts, and we had gotten to this blockade, and our funding had dried up, and I was looking for a funding source to fund this project where I had promised these 1200 people in Detroit that they were going to get this training. And so, I went to Councilmember Watson, and I said, "Councilmember, can you give us some guidance? I been researching this HUD [Housing and Urban Development] Section Three concept." Well, she was like the champion of this concept. Well, there was a law written by Congressman [John] Conyers about 50 years ago that actually says that when HUD developments are happening in communities that there should be dollars spent on creating jobs, contracts, and trainings in most impacted communities. And so, I had heard this from here, and I said "Oh, if I can tie this to my job training program, this is just what I need," 'cause I had heard HUD was going to do development in Detroit.

I went to Councilmember Watson. She gives me a binder like this--this is on a Thursday. She's like, "Baby, call me on Tuesday after you finish it." [laughs] Okay, like I don't have to go to work. "Call me on Tuesday when you finish it, and let's talk about it." So, I take the binder and, you know, of course I'm standing there shaking because I'm a little scared of her. I said, "Yes, ma'am, and thank you so much for 10 minutes of your time." I call her on Tuesday, and I say, "Councilmember, I did my homework, and I took my notes." She said, "Come in and see me again."

I come in this time, and I bring Debra with me. So, I'm thinking she's only going to give me 10 minutes. So, I go in, and she says, "Bring your friend." So, Debra and I go in, and we're sitting there all tense, and she said, "Oh, sit back and relax." She starts talking to us, and she said, "So, what are your goals?" So, I tell her how I want to create this program that's going to create jobs and put people to work and increase their skilled trades and therefore those are transferable to green sustainable energy, and I'm just going in. She said, "Well, you know I'm creating a taskforce on, you know, green energy," and I said, "Oh, wow. I did." And so, we're having this conversation.

Then, she said, "Oh, and I see you're over here at the education meeting, and I see you over here at this meeting." She said, "What do you do?" And, Debra and I had both--Debra had been laid off a year, and I had been--hadn't been able to find a job for six months. And so, we were both in this phase of about to run out of our unemployment. Like, I think I had one more check, and Deb might've had three, and I said, "Well, to be honest..." and I started telling her what was going on, and she just reached behind her and pulled out two blank sheets of paper out of her copy machine and handed me one and handed Debra one, and she said, "Write your name down. Put your social security on there and your address." She took both pieces of paper, and she said, "I'll see both of you on Thursday to start work." And that's just how it happened. And so, we slowly went out of the office, and we waited til we got to the elevator, and then we screamed all the way down because we just couldn't believe that it was just that smooth. But, she is the queen. She is the queen of Detroit to me.

[0:37:42]

PB: That's no doubt.

MLP: Oh, there's no doubt. The undisputed truth. [chuckles] Pound for pound.

PB: So, what kind of...what kind of things did...were you and Debra working on with her? What did you learn in that position working so closely with somebody with such immense knowledge, skills, expertise?

MLP: Oh, she taught us so much. I mean, she had Deb working on amazing projects. Like, she had fought for Africantown. You know, we have Mexicantown, and we had Chinatown, and we had all of these ethnic spaces, but there had never been the ability to create Africantown. And, Councilmember really had a desire to really acknowledge the African culture that had been developed really out of the industrial movement. And so, she was looking at Paradise Valley, which was out of that last part of the business hub that came as part of that corridor of Black Bottom which has a rich history. And if you ever get a chance to go to the museum, one of our colleagues and members of the We the People of Detroit Research Collective, Emily Kutil, has done research on Black Bottom and that sort of visual history. And so, Debra worked on that project.

We both worked on what was going on. Anything emergency management oriented, we both were on that. We both within a week of joining her staff was immediately elevated to this status of being able to go in closed sessions, which usually you have to go through a very rigorous process to be invited into that, and a lot of times it's only lawyers that come into that space. But, she allowed Debra and I immediately and that, to us, signaled that we were trusted. And with her, trust and loyalty is everything. She'll teach you what you need to know, but loyalty and trust you either--you're with her, or you're against her, and, you know, I learned that loyalty is everything.

I also learned from her the ability of negotiation. I really admire the way that she was always able to keep Detroit first. It didn't matter how much opposition she got, she was the shrewd legislator. Like, she was able to go to the table, and, even though I may not agree with you on any level, she was able to find one thing about that person, something about their family. She was always attentive to birthdays, anniversaries. She knew people's children's names, didn't matter how exotic it was.

She had this southern grandmotherly kind of way of pulling you in, and one of the most powerful speeches that she ever gave--and she gave many--was when I was able to see her during the bankruptcy with all of these bankers. Really, oligarchs were coming, and they would line up at the table to tell you how they were doing you a favor by taking your shit [laughs] because that's really what they were doing. [laughs] And, she would begin to tell them, "Well, you know that I'm your mother," and I remember the time I was looking. There was about six white men lined up, and she told them. She said, "I'm your mother. And because I'm your mother, I have to tell you the truth. You know I'm your mother, right?" And, they all shook their heads.

It was the most powerful moment I had ever seen in my life because I know within the Black community we'll talk about ourselves as kings and queens, but I had--other than seeing my mother operate in her sphere--I had never seen somebody in that kind of moment and so much resistance and so much coming at them be able to stand so flat footed and without apology be so loving in a statement that really was--should've been for that person very demeaning, but it was corrective action in a loving way that everything you're doing, you know, was wrong. And, the way she said and at the same time didn't let him off the hook, but to have each one of those men shake their heads when she said, "You know I'm your mother, right?" And, they said yes, each one of them.

I said, "Oh, my God." It was like that same moment when Malcolm X does this [points finger]. I said, "Ooh, I want that kind of power," and what I realized is it's courage. It's courage, and I thought, "My God, that kind of courage to understand that something bigger than you had to have a moment that was bigger than you, but you were able to stand up to that moment and embrace it and then do it in such a loving but very clear definitive and corrective way, that was power, baby. And, that kind of power is the kind of power I want to operate in."

And so, I think another time was when she took those 44 unions. And over the course of about four months, she met with every union leader that has any activities in Detroit and methodically sat with them and answered their questions and tested them and prodded them. And each one of them, she had done her homework so skillfully, she was able to say, "And Jim, how's your dad?" I'm saying it, doing it genuinely concerned, you know, "How's your dad? Now, I know we got

to deal with this over here, but how's your dad?" And then, you would see this guy that may be already prepared to give her a no go, "Jo, you know, my dad is really struggling," or, "We're having a hard time," or whatever it is. And then out of that, be able to bring them right back to the issue and say, "Well, you know, I know your dad's a good union man, so we got to do this one for labor. We got to make sure we protect families," and I just think that very skillful nurturing hand is some of what we've lost in diplomacy and these term limits and with all of what we're seeing in terms of this corporate buying of elections. We're missing what used to be just the art of diplomacy that we were doing collective policymaking for the interest of the country, of the community, and I think we've lost that. She the last of the Mohicans, if you will. [chuckles] She's just that girl.

[0:44:15]

PB: That's clear to going to council meetings now. Not having been here when she was on council, like, I can't help but go to city council meetings think like, "Oh, what if Councilmember Watson was up there? Like, I know she wouldn't've let you, you, and you off the hook."

MLP: No. No, and the other thing too you got to give her credit for is she would never let a person leave the table--a resident leave the table--without offering them some remedy, and I think that's another piece she understood, that at that seat she had power. She had legislative power to be able to take department heads and have them address or redress something that was going on with the community. So if you have a young mother come and say, "Miss Watson, you know, I'm here, and, you know, I've been kicked out of my house, or I've lost whatever." She would say, "Baby, wait a minute," and she would tell one of us like, "Monica, go with her," and then in the middle of the council meeting turn me around. They're convening business. "Take her to this department, this department, and this department, and then come back and check in," and I would have to. No matter what else I had to do, as far as she was concerned, that constituent was the most important thing. So rather--I had to chime in on a piece of legislation or something, oh no. If it took me all day, all night, I had to write that legislation because I was going to take care of that constituent first. So, I think that that piece, you know, also bodes well in terms of the kind of leadership that people deserve.

You know, and what she would explain to me all the time, "I'm not doing anything exceptional. This is the way you're supposed to legislate, but people haven't seen it in so long they think it's exceptional," and that was one of the things she told me, too, when I ran. She said, "You got to know when you run, you're not running a--you shouldn't call yourself into the race," that it should be a group a critical group of folks that have not only community confidence and credibility but somebody that you have confidence in, and that's what happened. That was the reason I was convinced to run. I thought, "My God, if Joann Watson thinks I can do this, shoot, I might get to do this." You know, I mean, she carries that kind of credibility in this city. There are parts of this city that doesn't know that she's not sitting in the seat at the council table anymore because people are so disconnected because council was taken off of TV for over a year. People stopped watching it. They still call her the council woman. So, you can go anywhere in this city, and that's how she's addressed, not as Dr. Watson--some circles. Reverend Watson, some circles. Now across the nation, she's Councilmember Watson. I mean, we could write a book just on her. Yeah, she's... [laughs] Yeah, she's...

[0:47:00]

PB: Sure enough. The stories she tells, too, about where she falls within this lineage of incredible Black politicians in the city, like what she had learned from Coleman Young and Erma Henderson and...

MLP: Yeah, Maryann Mahaffey.

PB: ...Maryann Mahaffey.

MLP: I mean, yeah. The effect that she just knew those people. I mean, she gave me Maryann Mahaffey--I mean, I'm sorry, Erma Henderson's Rolodex. Do you know how sacred it is to have a Rolodex that Erma Henderson wrote the name of Coleman Young, wrote the name of Dorothy Height, wrote the name of Rosa

Parks? [snaps] You know, Paul Robeson. I mean, this just like [claps] to even realize you touching that kind of history is off the chain.

[0:47:47]

PB: My goodness. So, you're in--you're working with--you and Debra are working with councilwoman Watkins or--Watson, sorry--at the period where emergency management is coming down the pipes. Can you kind of like bring us through from your position within city council what the view is as that's looming?

MLP: Oh, my God. Oh, we are... [pause] What we're doing is we're in these dual roles where Debra and I are meeting with community after work at night anywhere from like six to 10 o'clock at night, every night. Then, we're taking Saturdays and doing We the People organizing on Saturdays and Sundays. And, what we were doing was sort of collaborating with folks that were still employed with the city--attorneys, accountants, people in different departments--to be able to sort of get intel to be able to inform our strategies of resistance. So, there were groups like Free Detroit-No Consent, Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management, and those were like think tanks and hubs of writing speeches, writing press releases, op-eds, doing basic small white papers, things of that nature, but just a way to convene and strategize because so much was rolling out so quickly.

So, one of the first things that happened, the battle we were fighting before we came on council was against Dave Bing gifting away the Lighting Department. So, that was another part of the struggle. So once we came on staff in October, then what we began to see was there was no justification for it, giving the Lighting Department to DTE, that it was really...it was a power grab. It was a way to take away a revenue-generating entity within the city and be able to start diluting internally the city's economic power and influence. So, it was a way to take and say--like, right now that they're telling us the brightness of the lights aren't good for our eyes, that the lights only shine when it's concentrated on a specific area with these LED [light-emitting diode] lights. Well, the city of Detroit, we had a lighting system that provided about 80,000 lights. We have a third of the lights that we used to have. We actually are paying almost 320,000 dollars for less lights,

for DTE, an energy company, taking over our lighting system. So, you're still in the dark--matter of fact, you're more in the dark than you were before--but you're also more in debt than you were before. So, we had that situation happen.

Then, you had--at the same time, you're fighting the privatization and started gifting away totally federally funded departments. So, you're seeing departments like the Department of Health and Human Services privatized. These are the places that you're supposed to report infectious diseases. If you go back and look, there's a certain period of time where you won't see a whole lot of reporting for Detroit. Not saying we didn't have infectious diseases, but there's not a lot of reporting because private companies don't have to report to the public. You saw the privatization of the Department of Health and Human Services, Workforce Development. You saw the gifting away of major components or assets or swathes of land. You saw the Hantz Farm deal where people on the East side couldn't buy the lot right next door to them, wouldn't even consider them buying it. Didn't matter how much they would offer, even though they were shoveling the snow, cutting the grass, clearing the property, but you can't buy it. But then, we're seeing Jim Bob from out in the suburbs come in, and he can just cherry pick all around here and buy whatever he wants and give him a deal, you know. He can actually buy it for cheap. So, you cut the grass for 20 years, and you can't buy it, but now Jim Bob can have it for a dollar. Oh, if you want the school down the street, you can have that school for a dollar. [mocking tone] So, you saw that playing out.

We were instrumental in developing--I mean, she developed policy after policy. She created this whole mantra around the 248 million dollars that was owed by the state of Michigan to the city of Detroit that didn't get acknowledged until it was right at the statute of limitations, you know. She was the one that pointed out to President [Barack] Obama that there needed to be a Marshall Plan for Detroit at that time--and this is me talking, not Councilmember Watson. I believe that President Obama failed us tremendously. He was a part of signing off on the bankruptcy. Councilmember Watson, to her credit, actually assigned me to be the person to draft the letter to the Department of Justice asking them to intervene in looking at the constitutionality of emergency management. President Obama, what we found out later, was very close, in a very close relationship with Kevyn Orr, and that Kevyn Orr had actually been a part of his campaign in Maryland. So, he knew Kevyn Orr. So, these relationships of influence and of what I would

consider go beyond even race in some situations, but then class, play out very deeply and harm our community because people assume that persons of your ethnic identity are going to look out for your tribe. And so, we saw that play out.

We also saw during that period of time this continuous assault on schools. So, we started researching the school situation. What we found out is that the DeVoses have been instrumental in privatizing public education. They've also been instrumental in privatizing water. They are also part of privatizing the transportation system at many of your major airports. They also have been a part of diverting some of the funds that were here in the city of Detroit towards the busing system and controlling those contracts. If you look at Rizzo Trash, they're a part of the privatization of trash collection. So, they're monopolizing certain very critical parts of our, you know, health and welfare.

What we've found is that there's also cross pollination with, like, Eli Broad. The Eli Broad Foundation has been a part of actually bringing in and training teachers and principals at these very critical levels in these very urban and poor communities so that they begin to get indoctrinated into the privatization of education. So, you coming out of, what, 100,000 dollars of loan debt, and somebody tells you they're going to pay you 80,000 dollars to learn this methodology. You embrace it. And then, they tell you they'll get you a great job in Detroit, Miami [Florida], Chicago [Illinois] [laughs] teaching Black kids for two years. Then all of a sudden, you got street credit that you are the most knowledgeable person in urban education. And so, you've gotten rid of your debt, and you're well on your way to being a school administrator somewhere making a lot of, you know, a lot of good money.

So, we were able to expose that, that there are entities like the Parthenon Group, which is an educational hedge fund--international hedge fund--that people didn't know was deeply connected to this privatization. We were able to then point out that many of the actors here locally had been collaborative. This is where you get some of your rub with activism and resistance and the sort of the corporatizing of the non-profit philanthropic world. And so, what we began to see is like very clear entities like Skillman [Foundation] that had been known for their work on education and advocating for children had actually been a collaborator in ushering children out of the city of Detroit into suburban communities in order to drain

those particular communities so that those schools could then be forced into shutting down.

You found out then that Mike Duggan when he was--before he was mayor when he convened over that 1.5 billion dollar school bond that Detroiters indebted themselves in order to be able to upgrade their schools, Mike Duggan actually took that 1.5 billion dollars and navigated it out to suburban contractors to ensure that Detroiters didn't benefit, but also those same contractors are the same contractors that are funding his campaigns now. So, they're just redirecting those dollars in order to be able to control power. So, you drain the system--vulture capitalism at its best--in order to be able to devalue a community to then be able to buy it up for cheap to then be able to renovate it and declare yourself as king and lord, and that's what we've seen play out over and over again.

[0:57:04]

PB: See, you're connecting all of these dots as part of this analysis. I was watching some of the interview that you did with Kate Levy with you and Deb [Monica laughs] a couple years ago.

MLP: Oh, in the back there. [both laugh]

PB: Yeah, you were talking a little bit about the Save Ourselves campaign and like putting that, like, kind of like connecting the dots and that kind of like collective analysis into organizational praxis. And so, I'm wondering if you can walk us through that, and what you see as the importance of connecting those dots for that analysis, and actually how that looks in terms of putting the work into building that kind of like political consciousness?

MLP: I think a lot of our approach is very simplistic. It's like...one is there's just a clear understanding that our commitment is to create a beloved community. That's the overarching kind of banner. We believe that the existence that we're having right now is not the existence that we want for us or our children, and so

we're working on every front to improve the quality of life and to bring more training and opportunities to our community so that people understand that it's their power that's going to create the shift. So, I think through that framework we're constantly leveraging the collective, you know, that it is the collective power that is going to create these shifts, and we don't espouse this idea that we have any other alternative but to go forward and to win.

And so, I think with that we've embraced what we call the We the People way, [laughs] and that way means we are baking equity and justice into everything that we do. We are looking to share as much wisdom and knowledge that we have, but we're also willing to garner as much wisdom and knowledge that's around us. And so, Mama Gwen [Winston] talks about this power that we have within but then also this power without outside of you. And so, operating in that sort of checking in, checking out kind of thing where you're checking in to see if you're giving all you can give. Do you have the capacity to give? And then, leveraging the power of your teammates when it's an area you're not strong in or an area that you might need more training or more development. And so, I think that's been the beauty of this team of five that really has grown now to hundreds of folks that consider themselves We the People warriors.

And so, I think what we've done is that we were initially responding to our crisis. And if you look at the first five years of our work, that's what you'll see is that during those first five years we were just sort of putting out fires and really doing everything that we could to shape an informed analysis because what we found repeatedly is because there had been, after Coleman Young, this period of time where he sort of was like a father over the city. You knew you could trust that anything he was doing was going to be in the best interest of Detroiters. You knew that even if they perceived what he was doing as somewhat off the beaten path that you could trust that decision was being made with good intention.

And so, I think what we had after that is you had a lot of what I consider extremely racialized politics that was deeply seated in the 1967 rebellion that continued to feed this mantra of nothing good was left in Detroit, while at the same time you had Black leadership that was compromised over that 25-year span in a deep way, and I think not only compromised but then their--the things that they were doing was being done with malice and with ill intent--ill intention. And so, they

weren't--you could forgive somebody if they were making a mistake for the betterment of the community, but many of these people were serving themselves.

And so out of that, what we saw is that... [pause] is that we're at a point [pause] where we really need some truth telling, and it's got to be grounded in institutional knowledge and facts. I think that we're at a national point where what we're finding in Detroit is that nobody is really deeply wedded to parties anymore, and it's because of this convoluted very toxic kind of tribalism that happens within those entities. And so, what We the People started doing, we tried to operate within the political sphere to try to shift some things, and we still do to some degree, but we started moving more to building community power and talking. From that framework, how do we build power? How do we build collective power? How do we build individual power? And, I think the power conversation is taking us places that we didn't think we would go to: meeting with farmers and having students at the University of Michigan from the climate strike embrace our work, being able to meet with Indigenous mothers and having the Arab Spring reach out and having folks and mothers in Spain saying they stand in solidarity against water shutoffs.

So, I think out of that sort of common maternal framing, everybody that's a mother, or at least identifies with women or female bodies, can appreciate that, and I think those men amongst us that appreciate the value that women bring also respect that framework. And then, I think that we unapologetically present ourselves as strong women, and we're not shrinking violets anywhere or trying to appear weak. We want you to see us as strong. We want you to feel it. We want you to see it.

And so, I think coming with that sort of bravado is something that has really nurtured an intergenerational kind of approach to the work. I think also what We the People of Detroit brings that's a little different, we're looking for a succession plan. So, our young people know that they are a part of not only our now, but you're part of our futuring, and we're not wanting to dump the issues on you or to create a situation where you sort of feel like, "They left me with this mess." So, we're being very intentional about building that leadership in as we grow because we're growing and evolving.

You got to remember we came out of this trauma that you took our jobs and our pensions, and what everybody had to realize is that even though it was against the law for them to do it, they did it anyway. So, that also was another response, like, to council members. Deputize yourself, and nobody's coming to save you. We realized there is a duality in the law and justice system in this country, but what I find that was a really strong statement that I learned from my mom and from Councilmember is that equity and justice comes in the room on your two legs. No institution gives it to you, no organization, no church, no religion. Are you going to be equitable and just? So, I think really seeing that play out in terms of how they've handled their business has been one of the ways we approached it. We're going to be honest. We're going to tell the truth. We're going to admit if there's shortcomings with us, but we also want you to show up the same way and agree to stay in the room with me until we fix this issue, whatever it is.

[1:05:05]

PB: I want to dig in on one point that you made about building individual power and collective power, and I'm wondering if you could kind of walk us through using water as an example. Like, having communication or talking to people who are in crisis situations, how do you frame that, or how do you help people to frame that crisis situation in a way that promotes that kind of individual empowerment?

MLP: I think there's a couple of sessions. We just had a session yesterday with a couple of women over at Brightmoor...Brightmoor Collective [Brightmoor Connection Food Pantry?]. It's a food pantry. And in that neighborhood in the last year and a half, we've seen about 700 births. And out of those 700 births, over 500 of those births have seen low birth weight, premature, and then a large number of them miscarriages. And from the work that we've done with Nadia Gaber with UC [University of California] Berkeley, what we've seen is that there's a cycle of social impact of just being fearful that you're not going to have water because you'll fear that they'll take your children and so that added stress. And many times, people know that the most vulnerable part of your pregnancy is that first trimester so to have this kind of added pressure. Because you can live in a house without lights and gas, but if you don't have running water for 72 hours, you can lose custody of your children. That fear is real in this city. And so, from

getting that information and then hearing stories yesterday from women telling stories of losing their water service for less than 35 cents. One woman told a story of being shut off. For 10 cents, they shut her water off, and they took--it cost her 80 dollars to get it turned back on. Well, for a person on a fixed income, if I was struggling to get you that 10 cents, then you have now created an even greater burden for me. Now, I got to come up with 80 and then also pay you whatever the water service.

And so, we sit there, and we listened, and part of the struggle was I'm always tasked with trying to figure out the balance between when do we allow media and sometimes what can be voyeuristic kinds of academic persons to come into our community, and how do they come? And so, some of the conversations have been with, first of all, making sure that these women understand that their story is their story, that they have control over it. They have ownership over it. So, the media that wanted to come in, what I said to them is that you can come and listen to this session, but you can't tape anything. And, of course, media people want to get what they're trying to get. And so, we went back and forth, and he said, "Well, you know, I'd like to," and I said, "I understand you'd like to, but even being allowed to come in, and these women share these very vulnerable stories 'cause they don't know you, they know me. They trust me, and they trust me that I brought you in for a particular purpose," but we're also very strategic about the fact that we are using media to reshape our narrative, not giving media the story they want. And so, we're real clear about that. We're unapologetic about that.

So, I've talked from this framework of first of all the power that we have is that we're shaping our stories. We're not victims. We've been victimized, but we're not victims. And, none of these conditions of poverty are our fault, but it is our fight. And so, using these kinds of mantras and languages of power, of resistance, taking examples like Councilmember Watson who would never leave the table without giving you a history lesson about resistance and power, things that we did to defy the odds in Detroit, or just giving you a Coleman Young quote can be empowering to Detroiters. And so, I use that tactic in our group settings. I talk about the fact that we are the home, the city that put the world on wheels. I talk about the fact that we are the arsenal of democracy still to this day because if you can get away with it in Detroit, you can do it anywhere in America. But if we can stop it in Detroit, we can stop it anywhere in America.

And then, I talk about to the fact that this city has been a city that has taken multiple hits around the fact that water shutoffs have given us a black eye, but then we've also taught people how to be able to reconnect the human infrastructure of caring that people have water. 'Cause first to address your issue, I have to even care that you have an issue. And so, it's that kind of, I think, engagement, and the other thing that I think we've done is we've built a legacy of trust with our community where they know that we'll fight a lion about Detroit.

And so even among community, we had an incident a couple weeks ago where a group of loved attorneys that we've worked with for years that know our community wanted us to participate in sharing third-party information. And so, we resisted that. I said, "It's our policy that we don't share third party information." "But Monica, we're trying to help you with this lawsuit," and they are. They're helping with the lawsuit to try to put an injunction on them shutting off water, but it still is the We the People of Detroit policy that we don't share third party. So, it was interesting to have an activist and a colleague that I love actually get angry because I wouldn't just defy a process to be able to meet a need, but I went back to the board. We had a conversation, and we agreed it had to be done a certain way where the community was going to be able to be engaged on the front end as to whether they wanted their name and information shared and then making sure that they were fully informed that even with legal processes there is no guarantees because a lot of times communities are promised things and then those promises don't come to fruition, and I'm the one whose spent years building a reputation and relationship and that relationship--reputation could be in jeopardy, and my reputation is more to me than money. I mean, you can't buy it because I've worked for it. And so, I value that, and that's why we don't trade it off. There's no amount of money you can give We the People of Detroit for our liberation and our freedom and that of our community.

[1:11:44]

PB: 'Cause that's all you've got as an organizer, right, is the reputation of your community.

MLP: Oh, it's everything. It's everything. It makes me richer than anybody on the planet because what I have is the love and respect of the people that I love and respect. It don't get any better than that.

PB: Are there any--and you don't have to name names or anything. I'm...

MLP: Oh, I name names.

PB: Oh, you do. [Monica laughs] I just mean, like, respecting people's privacy and everything...

MLP: Oh, definitely. Definitely.

[1:12:13]

PB: Are there like people or individuals that stand out as they were most directly impacted and then became activated with what you've been doing with We the People?

MLP: [claps] One of my most exciting stories recently is that several of our interns from the last two summers through We the Youth of Detroit--we have this phrase that we tell them that they don't have to ask permission to save themselves, and they don't have to ask to be entered into the movement, that the fact that you want to be involved is enough invitation. Deputize yourself. Well, in August when they started shutting off the water to the schools in Detroit because of the high lead and copper, several of the students contacted me and said, "Mama Monica, you said that we didn't have to ask permission, and you said if we had an issue, that we needed to let"--I said, "I did say all of those things." They said, "Well, we need your help," and they called me to a meeting that they were convening, and I got to the meeting, and what they talked about is they said, "We need your help."

We want to do something about the fact that water's been shut off at their schools."

And out of that, they did some of the most beautiful organizing I had ever seen--'cause it's one thing to train people, it's another thing to see them apply it--and they, within a couple of weeks, organized themselves and started attending the water board meetings and started interrupting the mayor's meeting to put on the floor their questions and concerns about their schools' quality of water. And then, they went to the superintendent and had a meeting with him. And then, they went to a school board meeting and raised the questions there, and this was so amazing because the adults and parents were a little skittish about talking about it. They were nervous. They were afraid it would lead to more testing of their children. Some were afraid that we had our own Flint situation--which we do. Just on a small scale, but we do.

And so, to see these babies like standing up in a meeting and saying, "Mr. Mayor, can you explain to me why you have known this information since 2016 and you're just now deciding to shut off the water?" And, this kid's 15, shuts a room down. You hear me? It changes the dynamics of the space, and they did it repeatedly and methodically and very strategically. And so, they got together and decided that none of the adults were really listening, and they didn't feel they were getting the results that they wanted.

And so, they decided in September they were going to use school Count Day, which is the period of time where they're looking at population in order to be able to get funding, and one of the things that we had realized is that, as the adults in the space, we had all grown up under this understanding that school Count Day was one day, that just this one day, the kids show up, and they get counted. But, thank God that kids are smarter than us. They did their research, they did their homework, and they came back. And, they set us down, and they brought their own attorney--which I thought was super cool, something I would do. [laughs]--and they said, "Mmm, no. You adults are wrong. It's a 45-day window, and we've got 45 days for them to count all of us, and we don't miss school. We go to school. So if we miss that one day, they're lying to you when they say it's going to mess up the funding for DPS [Detroit Public Schools]."

So, of course, I go back, and I'm talking to the other ladies, and we're concerned because many of these students are honor students. They're student body president. They're debate champions. They're tennis scholars. I mean, just amazing kids--young people. And so, they said, "We're going to go through with it. We're going to do it, and because you said we didn't have to ask permission, we're going to take you at your word. We're not asking permission, but we do need your help." And so, we agreed to help. We said, "What do you need?"

And, what they decided is that they were going to have their own teach-in here at Cass Commons, and they were going to bring their peers together and do a walk-out, a symbolic walk-out, come here, and actually convene themselves around actually having a teach-in to talk about the issues that they were concerned about. And so, they invited people like Dr. Gloria House that does this amazing training on COINTELPRO [Counter Intelligence Program]. They brought like Bill Wylie-Kellermann, who just has a long legacy of resistance here in the city of Detroit. They brought in just sort of like the who's who of activists. They also had in BYP100 [Black Youth Project 100] and Black Lives Matter and some of the gun violence work they had been doing. And out of that, what they decided is that they weren't getting any answers. Nothing was moving. They did this amazing teach-in that got not only local news, but it ended up being in the New York Times.

But, they decided that wasn't good enough. So, they realized that after this October action on Count Day that coming up next was going to be the election. And so, they said to me, you know, "Miss Monica, we're really concerned because we're still not getting any responses. We want to test the water at our schools." So, they were just going to sneak water out of their schools, and I said, "Guys, there's a problem with chain of custody. So, we can't do the schools because we can't get permission to test the water because they don't want us to know what's coming out of the tap, but what if we strategically test the water at the houses around your schools? Let's pick three of the top schools with the worst lead and copper results, and let's target those schools," because they went to those schools.

And, they organized. Within a couple of days, they had this brilliant idea of taking the election as the day they would sign people up so they knew that they would be residents that lived in those communities. We didn't have to do an extra mapping or charting. We knew, too, that if they agreed in that moment that we had their name and their contact information to be able to do follow up. And within about four hours, they got 120 people to sign up at three different precincts.

And so, we were able to take that information, and we've done two series of testing. It has been a collaborative partnership with Freshwater Future and the University of Michigan Bio Lab [University of Michigan Biological Station]. They're not only learning about what is happening in their own communities in terms of water accessibility and affordability, but now they're learning about water quality. And then, what we hope to do is with the leadership of We the Youth of Detroit and five other municipalities around the Great Lakes is create the Great Lakes Water Camp where these youth will be coming together from all over the Great Lakes shaping policies as young people because, many times, we only engage them once they're 18, but they need to be engaged in this process before they're 18.

PB: That's awesome.

MLP: I know. I can't wait to go to camp! [both laugh] [claps] Yes!

PB: That's...thank you for that. That's so interesting, like that sustainable model there that like, you know, don't wait till somebody's 18, then try to get them interested.

MLP: It was their idea! They were saying, "You old people only talk to us when we turn 18 about voting, but we need to know about the policies to vote for before then." And so, we said, "You know what, let's just get started, and you help us write the policy. That way, you not only know it, you'll be a part of writing and drafting. So, you'll have another skill that you bring to bear," because that's part of the problem now. We have an electorate that is not engaged and then--you

know, not civically engaged and not understanding it from a civic literacy standpoint how to be able to move the process. And, I don't want to hold the power because that's too much responsibility. Power is about sharing the power collectively.

PB: That's sustainable power.

MLP: Exactly.

[1:20:15]

PB: I want to back us up just a little bit to bridge this gap in terms of chronology. We were talking about the work that you and Deb and City Councilmember Watson were going against emergency management. Can you kind of bring us through emergency management and explain--and I'm sure you've done this a million times, but repetition, I guess, doesn't hurt for historical records--how emergency management and bankruptcy impacted water access in the city of Detroit?

MLP: I mean, the bankruptcy was the reason that there was the water crisis, but the water crisis was cause for the bankruptcy. So, if you look at--excuse me--the bankruptcy, one of biggest things that they did is they began to get rid of certain key roles within the Water Department. So, some of the things that they mothballed were some of the high-leveled, specialized expertise within the Water Department. So like, for example, DWSD, Detroit Water and Sewage Department, didn't have to wait to find out about quality of their water. They had their own water testing lab inside of the Water Department, whereas everybody else has to send their results. Even Michigan State [University] and U of M [University of Michigan] sends their stuff to MDEQ [Michigan Department of Environmental Quality]. You know, we didn't have to wait on that. We could tell you in a couple of hours what our quality was, which gave us this ability to take a lot of pride in the fact that we ran our water system extremely well.

Up until the late 1990s, we had an award winning system [pause] internationally. And so, I love to say that in rooms where they consider us to be deficient and corrupt and not able to run this massive system, but what happened is, as I said, in 1955 when the state of Michigan legislated the city of depart--Detroit to build out this system of about 126 municipalities and townships getting their water from Detroit--about 3.8 million Michiganders get their water from a well that the citizens of Detroit built--is that what we started seeing is this manufacturing of a crisis.

So, part of what happened is while you had an emergency manager in Flint--which you had several of them, but each of them systematically creating a financial crisis and blaming the unaffordability of water that they were purchasing from Detroit. Now mind you, they were purchasing that water wholesale, but they were claiming through emergency management and state advisement that it was not affordable. So, Flint was actually advised--its political leaders, its councils, its mayors--that in order to save money and keep the city from continuously sort of slowly diving into their own bankruptcy that they needed to build their own water system and therefore invest in that and get off of DWSD system, which the narrative was Detroit is draining us. It is extracting from us. And so, this is why they ended up being forced to build the Karegnondi Water Authority.

At the same time, people must understand if you look at a map of the Detroit Water Sewage Department, Flint at the top of the T. So, you 're talking about almost an hour and a half away, that's how expansive this system is. Flint's at the top of that T. Flint was our largest external customer. So, to lose Flint off the DWS system meant that to the markets, to Wall Street, to the politicians, then what you could begin to describe is Detroit's inability to meet its bonding obligations. So to the rational mind, to a business mind, to a person that's not in the city, then you explain that failed leadership, Kwame Kilpatrick, corruption. I mean, you don't even have to say a full sentence, you know. In this state, you just say names, do a name drop, you know, letting contracts, backdoor deals, things like that. And so, you saw that play out.

And then, the next thing you see start to happen is that emergency management does things like when you look at Blue Cross Blue Shield, Councilmember Watson actually gave up her health insurance, and she asked other city leaders to do the

same. She was the only one that did it, and she began to pay her own health insurance to try to create cost savings to the city. This was right before bankruptcy. The emergency manager was appointed. Well, one of the bad deals that Dave Bing made is he gave a deal to Blue Cross Blue Shield for 300 million dollars to provide healthcare to city workers and retirees. [coughs] Excuse me. [pause] He gave 300 million dollars to Blue Cross Blue Shield to keep them in the city of Detroit and gave them the contract for the healthcare for the city [coughs] for 300 million dollars, and you had five other competing insurance providers offering to give you the same package for 100 million dollars.

Now, I need somebody in this room to tell me what would justify any deal for somebody just to stay in your city that the majority of your workers don't live in your city. So, it's not generating any taxes for you, and what little taxes it's generating are staying downtown in the Detroit Development Association--Authority [Downtown Development Authority?]. So, all the taxes that are generated from all the investments that are extracted from the entire city are being concentrated in the 7.2 miles of downtown.

So when you look at water from an emergency management standpoint, what we saw--we began to track from 2012 up to 2016 the shutting off of water, and what we saw is that, prior to ushering the city into bankruptcy, you had a period of time where--Detroit has always shut off water. [coughs] Excuse me--but we saw this aggressive uptake of shutting off water.

And then, the next thing we know, then there's these threats that if you don't sign this contract, if you don't move this deal, if you don't make sure that this development happens, and I mean in a way any other situation would've seemed almost like mafioso, but because the state has spent about 50 years--and I really hate that sort of saying Detroit vs. Everybody because I think what it does is it actually feeds the racial divide of the state, and I know it's cool swag from a street cred perspective, but when you know that there's this huge elephant in the room of institutional and spatial racism that is playing out in a very violent way to the citizens of Detroit, then it just it loses some of its cuteness to me.

And so, I continue to push back against that and remind people that the city of Detroit is the reason that the suburbs were able to thrive, that it's the city of Detroit that created the middle class. It's the city of Detroit that created the labor movement. That the reason that many of us enjoy some of the provisions of a five day work week and healthcare and OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] is because somebody fought for those rights. They didn't just give 'em, and they continued to fight to keep them.

We started seeing, too, because of Cecily's work that they were coming for the pensions. So, it wasn't just about seizing the water because when you seize the water you also seize the pension because the biggest investment from pensioners had been in the water system because Coleman Young had always taught us, "Whatever you do, don't let 'em take the water," and he had already taught the people of Detroit the importance of any civilization is to have its own water access. So as they were painting us as the murder capital of the world, as they were creating this master narrative of failure in Detroit, we had to remind people that 23 percent of the commerce that comes into the country comes in by way of Detroit, that we sit on what almost 21 percent of the world's fresh water, that we sit on the Great Lakes, 85 percent of the bottled water that's consumed in the country comes out of the Great Lakes, and that Detroit also built a system that is still providing water that 3.8 Michiganders regardless of the fact that it has been commandeered and actually is being chipped away at that and dismantled for third-party source.

So as they go through this regionalization, one of the things that We the People has done is continue to be that sort of mythbuster around how we got here because of many of the things that are being perpetrated on Detroiters are gifted to the rest of the community as justification for why we were taken over. I think that one of the things that We the People of Detroit has done through the Community Research Collective is we have created such a high level of citizens-based research rigor that meets that high bar of scientific quality that has gotten us into some spaces, and they never saw us coming, you know. Those people did this? [laughs] But once you get in the room and you're able to at least articulate what your data says and then at the same time narrate what your

community's going through, then sometimes it gives you an opportunity to have a different conversation.

And so with emergency management, what we were able to point out and map for people--like, everybody kept saying, "We feel like it's racially applied." Well, guess what we did? We just mapped it. Well, when you map it, you can see it's racially applied. There's 53 percent of the African American population in the state have been under this form of oppression and austerity. When you're able to map it, then you can see and show that the progression of the years and how the system was built out and see the shrinkage in terms of your tax base. But sometimes, when people are--have been fed this bad broth of racial divide, they don't even see sometimes their own best interests. It's just, "I don't like you, and you don't like me and"--hey, wait a minute. If we reevaluate this thing, it may be in all of our best interests to keep water public. It may be in all of our best interests to make sure everybody has water on.

One of the biggest things we were able to expose is there's a public health impact to shutting off water, and one of the biggest things that happened is we worked since 2015 up to 2008 with Henry Ford Health Systems Global Health Initiative to really try to expose that there was a public health connection between shutting off water. Well, we worked with Alex Plum and Dr. [Marcus] Zervos. Alex is an exceptional young man. And so, he said, "Monica, I don't know if it's causation, but let's look at the research and see." I thought that was a reasonable approach to it. So, he may not be as politicized as I am on the issues, but he was willing to take a scientific approach. Well, we began to work together. We brought our teams together. Some of the expertise he has, some of the expertise we have, and we thought we had a great team of experts.

And so, we worked together. They layered over 37,000 hospitalizations over our water shutoffs data and found that there is some correlation. We didn't say causation, but you see some direct correlations there. And so with that, we know that you're about 1.58 times probable of getting sick if you live on a block that doesn't have water. Well, that's all across the city. And so with that, one of the things we found out is that Henry Ford has about 2.2 billion dollars in contracts with the city of Detroit, and it's known city-wide that the mayor is pretty vindictive, you know, when he doesn't get his way. And so, they just sort of

secretly said, you know, he's sort of let us know that all of those contracts would be on the line if we released this information. And so, you have the same people that are championing the Legionnaires' research in Flint actually being silent on the causation of possibly more waterborne diseases and skin infections based on not having water in Detroit.

And so, I've constantly had to raise the people. These are the places where the everyday citizen begins to question everybody, your motives, your...your agenda, your values. So, does that make these people bad people? No, but they're afraid of losing their jobs. See, I've never had a job that made enough money where I cared about losing it. [Monica laughs] I just haven't, you know. When I get one, I'll let y'all know. So far... [Monica laughs]

[1:34:00]

PB: So, I want to ask about that, like, collective consciousness and collective power building you said you meant to plan. I was struck by some of the knowledge that was shared on World Water Day last month or so.

MLP: March.

PB: In March. So, it's like some of the lessons that I was hearing from Claire McClinton and how like being in this struggle for this period of time has given a completely new insight into power structures and that kind of analysis. So, I guess that's my long-winded way of asking... [Monica laughs] that's my long-winded way of asking like about your collaborative work with organizers in Flint and like how through that collaboration you've grown. Or, what lessons have you learned through that kind of work?

MLP: I mean, the first thing I'll have to say is I have to give all of that credit to Debra Taylor, who is from Flint, and it was because of Deb's deep relationship as a Flintstone that we sort of got entreed into places that they probably wouldn't have allowed us just because the wounds were so deep. Everything was so raw. I

mean, things are still not--if there's ever going to be normal again. And so, I really have to credit that. And then, she spent about six months during that hard winter of 2014 going into 2015 going up to Flint. Matter of fact, she had two car accidents that summer--that winter because of the weather, going up to make sure she kept her meetings.

'Cause that was the other thing we committed to, to make sure we showed up when we said. If they needed support, we made sure that--in conversations even to this day, people call us all the time wanting us to give an interview about Flint, and Mama Claire, Nayyirah [Shariff], Melissa [Mays], others will tell you--LeeAnne [Walters]--I reach out. I say, "Guys, so...so Al Jazeera, CNN, MSNBC, whomever is trying to get a hold of you." And then, you know, of course, because the trust is so deep they'll say, "We don't have the capacity, Monica. You got it do it," or--but just that checking in and honoring, you know, that even though we have a water crisis, it's a different crisis and recognizing that when you work in the framework of the beloved community, there's enough capacity to love through your own struggles to help somebody else through theirs.

And, I would say that Flint has done the same thing for Detroit. Flint was the first to show up when we were dealing at the height of our water shutoffs. They been continuous in making sure that when they're talking about their water struggle that they're connecting it to our water struggle and other water struggles. They have been the poster child of being through that kind of spiritual draining assault where you're fighting not only for your reputation and for your democracy and for your local control, but then you're fighting for your health and your children's health and your mama's health, and you might have to take your auntie to the doctor, and now your daddy can't work, and I know women in that city that are dealing with all of those dynamics and their own health issues and going to work everyday.

So, what we try to do is--in terms of narrative shaping--is anytime I get an opportunity, I have to talk about that revolutionary leadership. See, it's one thing to jump in line with a protest where it's 4,000 people, and everybody's going to do it for about four hours, then we're going to get a burger and get a beer and go home. It's another thing when I'm five years deep, and the story ain't hot no more, and you might've gave water two years ago, but you ain't feeling it no more.

You then moved on. You might be protesting with the abortion movement now. Well, they still don't have water. And even though they have water coming out of their tap, they can't trust the quality of it. They can't afford it. They're paying the highest rates in the nation for water they cannot consume, but guess what? If they don't pay it even though they know it's not quality water, they lose their children. They lose their home.

So, my belovedness has to say to me, "Yeah, Monica, you working in Detroit, but ain't you got time to check on your sister and your brother and jump in the car with Deb and go to Flint," and that's how we rolled. It wasn't anything like orchestrated like, "Oh, the activist strategy book says..." [Monica laughs] No, it's a heart thing, you know. Its' responding like--I could be going through my own relationship stuff. If my sister call, I'mma be like, "Baby, I need a minute. I got to talk to my sister," and that's how we treat our organizing here.

When you look at the legacy of people like General Gordon Baker--[pause] you know, General Gordon Baker is not a revolutionary hero to Detroiters. He's a labor icon around the world because he understood that the struggles that were happening to poor Black folks here in Detroit were happening to poor white folks in Appalachia in Kentucky and was happening to immigrants that were in this country working, and it was happening to Navajo women. He understood that. And out of that principle of understanding that, he actually shared that, the philosophy, throughout his life.

So, when you talk about a Claire McClinton from Flint--Claire McClinton was a part of sort of being that student of General Baker. She's a part of that legacy of resistance that built the middle class through the auto industry. Claire McClinton was one of the first people when emergency management was ticking the path. Claire McClinton was the first person to show up in Detroit and say, "Put my name on the lawsuit," when some people were standing back a little scared trying to see which way the wind was gon blow. So when Claire McClinton called and said, "Monica and Deb, we need some water in Flint," we didn't flinch. We lined up U-Hauls and got a few brothers that came and loaded up trucks, and we drove to Flint, and we been going to Flint ever since. And, our commitment to Flint is that we will not stop delivering water to Flint until Flint says the pipes are fixed.

[1:40:41]

PB: I guess along those same lines, like, can you...can you explain to us the global context of the water crisis and the global responses? Like, you mentioned that interconnectedness between Detroit and Flint. What does that look like on a global scale and what's the policy of that?

MLP: Oh, it's bananas. It's bananas. I tell you, when...when we go anywhere, probably the most impactful story I can tell you about that experience of global and national impact when you say you're Detroit. In 2014--this is when after Charity [Hicks] had transitioned--Tawana Petty had been invited to the United Nations to have a conversation around water sanitation, and it was the same time the climate march was going on in New York. And so, we get to the march, and we're--like, the march is like two-thirds up the street, and the marshal runs up, and we've got on these grey We the People t-shirts, and there's just two of us. It ain't like it's 10 or 20 where you'd say, "Oh, that's a crowd." And, the marshall runs up and says, "Detroit." Well, you know, being a Detroiter you feeling flattered. [Monica laughs] "How'd you know?" And she said, "Come with me."

So, we start walking with her, and we're thinking she was gon put us in the line, and she was like, "No, you guys got to go to the front of the line." The line is blocks away. So, we're back, and we get like right before like the fire engines is where we get at. She escorts us through the middle of the climate march, and at each station as we go through the climate march with the HBCUs [Historically Black Colleges and Universities] and, you know, we cutting up with them, [Monica sings] "Whose Water? Our water. Whose water? Our water." I mean, we're having a ball. She's like, "No, you're coming with me." We get to the next juncture. We get here. It may be immigrant workers, you know. So, we're talking to them. Some of them are speaking in Spanish, and we like, "No español, but we stand in solidarity," you know. They like, [yelling] "Detroit!" You know. And so, you like, yeah. You get to the next station, and you might see--like, it might be a bunch of hippies, you know, from wherever and they were just like, "Detroit!" And, I mean, it's like, "Oh my God, the love," you know. She's like, "You--no, come on. We get to the next station," and the Native American family members have had themselves petitioned off. Like, they had marshalls all around them. You couldn't get near 'em.

They didn't want their picture taken, and, I mean, it was like real standoffish. So, we're standing there and we're walking. And then, we hear all of this noise, and it's the delegation from Detroit. And, we all end up together, and the French journalists are following us, and I'm saying each juncture, you're hearing every step of the way, "Detroit." I get to the peace people, like all of these sisters and nuns for peace, and Tawana's making fun of me because I had got them chanting, "When our water is under attack, what do you do? Stand up, fight back!" She's like, "You got the nuns talking about fighting," [laughs] but they were having such a good time.

But, to see Detroit embraced in such an honorable way and with a lot of love and respect for our work around climate justice, the work that's come out of EMEAC [East Michigan Environmental Action Council], the work that Charity has done, the work that's come out of Mama Rhonda Anderson in Sierra Club. I mean, my God. 15 years of her being pretty much the only person of color holding down that environmental justice space in this area is just unbelievable, but that was Detroit sort of setting the bar, the asthma capital of the world. And then, she's teaching people on, you know, cancer and what's happening with asthma, but they're then also these people are empowering themselves to shift beyond that trauma. So, it was that.

And, the same thing sort of happened for us when we were at another setting with some young people, and to be at the Climate March at the University of Michigan just a couple of months ago for World Water Day and to have 3[000]--4,000 students where they only invited five adults, and then to be one of those adults that they invited because of the work of We the People of Detroit, and then to see these young people actually have created 10 demands and one of those demands is that the University of Michigan would divest out of fossil fuels but that also that person will support the elimination of the shutting off of water and embrace a water affordability plan for Detroit and beyond. To me...that said to me that our work is planted in good soil that is yielding good fruit, that young people are not leaders of tomorrow, they're leading right now. It gives us hope at We the People of Detroit, and I can tell you as a Black mother of four children that when we don't have we hope, we have nothing, and our hope is our children.

And so, to see the innovation and to see the creativity and to know the artistry--because that's another thing that needs to be lifted up. It was young people taking their art--spoken word, hip hop, you know, the ability to do graphic art. Antonio [Cosme] was looking at 10 years for just spray painting "Free the Water," but for us it was such a badge of honor to see that he was using his art in a way that was messaging really a social justice consciousness in that moment.

And, the same is true with Tawana Petty who just one day after walking with me to deliver water to mothers at the North End of Detroit, and we went house-to-house, and each woman told us they didn't need water. And then, you would find out as you walk to the next house the other sister would say, "Yeah, she need water. Take her some water," and it was after that--it was raining, and we're crying as we deliver this water. And then, Tawana Petty comes back and creates this amazing poem, "Hell from a city where the water is off, 45 from Flintstone where they pickin' us off. They thought they had us cornered, but they pissed us off. We done come together, who would've thought?" And, I just love that because I was there when she experienced it, and we still choke up a bit when you realize that people running water hoses from house to house. But then, I always think about Tawana always reminding me that's Beloved Detroit, that even people may be struggling economically, they love each other enough. They have enough human consciousness to care that each other has water. So, I'm betting on Beloved Detroit.

[1:47:46]

PB: I want to ask does--that is reminding me of when we interviewed Tawana, we asked her a question about the role of art in activism. She stopped. She cleared her throat. She took a glass of water, and she started singing, and that was her response, and that was in [Monica snaps her fingers]--we were doing that in St. Peter's [Episcopal Church]. So, you know in that space, it was resonating. You could hear it.

MLP: Mmhm.

PB: And so, that's...that's coming to the front of my mind, and it makes me also want to ask: were you there that night when Mama Charity brought up wage love in St. Peter's?

MLP: I was actually invited into the private space that she was brought to before she addressed the crowd. And so, I was sitting in the room with she and Bill Wylie-Kellermann, Councilmember Watson, and I remember, you know, anybody who knows Charity--Charity was that woman that you think of when you think of Harriet Tubman, you know, a very strong physically enduring presence, you know, mixed with a side of Maya Angelou kind of vernacular but then at the same time to then flow into maybe more of like a Queen Latifah kind of rap moment and then take you to this very high intellectual of maybe like a, you know, a Dr. Gloria House. And, to have that combination of somebody...of somebody...that kind of human fluidity that was just so masterful at navigating whatever situation--then, wow, just... [Monica pause] to go from that kind of power and then to see her soul physically shaking scared me to death.

And to sit and watch Councilmember Watson console and caress her and tell her it was going to be alright as she told us about the condition she was in...the condition she was in in this what she called the pit, the bullpit and how she talked about this corralling of Black female bodies and how these women were in all kinds of conditions of, you know, DTs [delirium tremens] and pregnancies, and some were on their menstrual cycles and didn't have anything to care for themselves. You got one facility to use for what she described was about a hundred women in these conditions, and she was in these conditions for about 48 hours. And, talking about different medical needs and mental illnesses and all of this playing out in this cage that she's in. And at the same time, her foot is cut, and she can't get any medical treatment. And, she's a diabetic, so it puts her at even a greater risk.

But, it reminded me if you've ever seen those movies that are sort of these reenactments of slavery where the Black mother is standing and she's watching her children be ripped from her arms and sold into slavery, and you feel like this pain, but it doesn't start here, it starts here. That's what it was like watching Charity because I had never seen Charity in a weak moment. I seen her at funerals. I seen her at protests. We been in all kind of community fights, never

ever saw a weak moment. And, to see her almost appear to be something broken [pause] was an unforgettable experience. And then, to see her be able to gather herself after, you know, Pastor Bill talking with her and Councilmember counselling and praying with her, to then--to see her gather herself with enough courage to then go out and address the community knowing how concerned and frightened they were and having to muster up--and, I mean, you saw her physically just totally transformed and present this very courageous and powerful and loving telling of the story of trauma and then compelling and demanding from that room to wage love. [pause]

We had no idea that we wouldn't see her again, [pause] but I often tell people that story of Charity because I want people to remember that sometimes revolutionaries die in these struggles, and the work that Charity did is not in vain [pause] because those of us that understand that she made the ultimate sacrifice and that was to be able to make sure that Detroiters were respected on a national level in terms of their resistance and fight here and making sure that the country knew clearly that what had happened to Detroit was not of their own making and design, that it had been a manufactured narrative, a contrived bankrupting, a seizing of power to destroy a people that deserve to be free. And so, I always want to make sure that work that we do is acknowledged as being an extension of the work that she has done.

[1:54:28]

PB: Thank you for sharing that. I want to be mindful of time. It's about 6:30. So, it might be a good note to leave us on is what does that beloved--if we're honoring Mama Charity and waging love and we're looking forward to creating that beloved community, in your visioning, what does that look like?

MLP: I think it looks like--it looks like the work that we have seen coming out of the collective of the Michigan Water Unity table where a lot of activism is--has really fed and guided the work coming out of that table to unify beyond just frontline and most impacted but to really guide those policymakers and stakeholders in utilities to be more equitable and be more just. I think it looks like that--the work that we saw coming out of our We the Youth of Detroit, that

self-determination and cooperative work and the understanding of their own power to create this beloved community.

I think it looks like the legacy and the continuous work of JoAnn Watson who could very much rest on her laurels and sort of shake her head and put her feet up but continues to guide and mentor and work and develop and create and innovate. It looks like five months of Debra Taylor fearlessly traveling to Flint in the snow, and the roads were not clear and hazardous. It looks like Cecily McClellan putting up her money to create a fund with other pensioners to fight the taking of pensions all the way to the Supreme Court. It looks like Russ Bellant going into his pension and paying for six of his neighbors' water to be turned back on so that they wouldn't lose their houses. It looks like Dr. Gloria House in her seventies still guiding and creating Freedom Schools in the city of Detroit so the children are nurtured in an environment where they are loved and respected. It looks like work from Linda Campbell who has used all of her brilliance to educate and inform and empower others around their voting rights and around much of the austerity that's happening in the city. It looks like Bill Wylie-Kellermann going to jail because he loves the people of Detroit that deeply.

It looks like the volunteers of We the People of Detroit that continue to get out water and do it all year round, and many people don't even know their names, and many of them have committed and have done this for three to four to five years. It looks like the children of Detroit that in even failing schools, you see their brilliance and their brightness and winning chess championships at a national level and competing in sports in addition to being scholars and taking the blunt of being the butt of many jokes of austerity and demise and still being able to innovate and create and do it with a lot of class and a lot of swag. And, it looks like all of those ancestors that contributed to our freedom and our privileges that we'll never know their names but thought enough of all of us that they did all that they could to give us the best that they had. And so, the question is: what are we gon do? What are we gon do?

PB: Thank you.

MLP: Thank you. I appreciate you guys. You've been very patient with the laborious process.

PB: We're very grateful that you gave us some of your time.

MLP: And, I hope it works for you wherever it goes.