

**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

**Claire McClinton**

Interviewed by

MARCIA BLACK AND PETER BLACKMER

August 22, 2019

Flint, MI

## Narrator

Claire McClinton, born and raised in Flint, Michigan, comes from a family of auto workers and union members and worked for General Motors herself for many years. She participated in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in the 1960s and was active in the United Automobile Workers during her years at General Motors. When the Emergency Manager Law passed in Michigan in 2011, she was active in the campaign to repeal it. She is the co-founder of the Flint Democracy Defense League, which was founded to oppose emergency management and then became active in the water crisis fight. She is also a member of the League of Revolutionaries for a New America and a member of Healthcare-NOW, a group that supports a single-payer healthcare system.

## Interviewer

Marcia Black (she/her) is a proud Detroiter, Black queer feminist archivist, memory worker, and organizer with BYP100 (Black Youth Project 100) in the M4BL (Movement for Black Lives). Her life's mission is to preserve and share the histories of Black women and Black queer and trans people - whose stories are often erased from our telling of the Black radical tradition.

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

## Abstract

Claire McClinton begins by discussing her childhood in Flint, how the League of Revolutionary Black Workers influenced her in the 1960s, her job at General Motors, and her active involvement in the United Automobile Workers there. She then recounts the 2011 Michigan emergency manager law, the successful campaign to repeal it, and how the lame duck legislature passed a slightly different, referendum-proof version of the same law. She also discusses the effects of emergency management in Flint and around the state, including privatization and prioritizing corporations over people. She recounts how the water crisis unfolded in Flint, how activists sought and eventually captured the attention of the national media, how the situation in Flint has inspired water activism around the country, and how narratives pushed by the government still claim that the

crisis was never that bad or is now fixed. She discusses coalition building between different groups in Flint as well as between Flint and Detroit and other cities. She gives advice to cities and activists dealing with similar disasters, discusses other Black female leaders in Flint, and recounts a memory of Mama Lila Cabbil.

### Keywords

Emergency management; Flint water crisis; Flint, Michigan; Healthcare; Journalism; Labor unions; League of Revolutionary Black Workers; Lila Cabbil; Privatization; United Auto Workers; Water shutoffs

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None

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Transcript of interview conducted August 22, 2019 with:

Claire McClinton [CM]

Flint, MI

By: Marcia Black [MB] and Peter Blackmer [PB]

**MB:** Can you say your name, where you live, and the organizations you're a part of or affiliated with?

**CM:** Okay. Claire McClinton from Flint, Michigan. We refer to ourselves as Flintstones. And, I belong to a number of organizations, community organizations, political, radical organizations. I belong to... I am a retiree from General Motors. This is a General Motors town, so I'm a UAW [United Automobile Workers] member. I'm a member of the democracy--Flint Democracy Defense League, a organization that grew out of the campaign to overturn the emergency manager law. I'm a member of the League of Revolutionaries for a New America. I'm a member of the coalition of groups here that work with education and civics, you know, things like that. So, I'm...I'm affiliated [laughs] with a lot of groups. Uh huh.

[0:01:33]

**MB:** Thank you. Can you tell us a little bit about growing up in Flint?

**CM:** Well, growing up in Flint was a experience of being in a city where the auto industry reigned supreme. When I grew up, the UAW had fought the good fight. We're the home of the great sit-down strike, so the union had been established

when I was born, and I am a member of a family of... My mother and father were auto workers, and there were seven of us, and we never saw a day being hungry. We had a very decent life. They raised seven children. We...we had dental care, health care. We had decent schools and all of that. So, we were sort of like... Flint and Detroit [Michigan], Pontiac [Michigan] and these sorts of places where the auto industry was based had very decent wages and benefits for the workers in these communities.

[0:02:50]

**MB:** Okay. Can you talk a little bit about what got you started organizing in Flint?

**CM:** Well, actually, I was very...as...as a child... I'm a baby boomer. So as a child of the [19]60s, you almost had to be under a rock, living under a rock not to get influenced by all the social movements that were going on at the time, the civil rights movement. And then, I was very attracted to and influenced by the League of Revolutionary Black Workers out of Detroit. And by my family being all auto workers, I was just very compelled to being influenced by that organization. So that helped formulate a lot of my political outlooks, and I was very inspired by them. I mean, back in the [19]60s, everything was popping.

**MB:** Mmhmm.

**CM:** So like I said, unless you was living under a rock, you was...you was in something.

**MB:** Mmhmm.

**CM:** The anti-war movement, civil rights movement. It's just a...a time of tremendous social upheaval.

[0:04:07]

**MB:** So, can you talk a little bit about what were some of the things you were involved in at that time?

**CM:** Well, I did join the League [of Revolutionary Black Workers] for a while, and I lived in Detroit for a while, but I wanted to come back home. So I came back to Flint, and I was fortunate to get hired in at General Motors, and I was very active in the union, you know, and I held several offices in the union and stuff, and I was just...and I still am a true union supporter and lover. I'm not happy with all the things I see happening with the union right now, but the...the notion of workers being able to collectively bargain for their wages and benefits and stuff, and I...I...I think it was a tremendous asset to the everyday people, and I'm proud that I had opportunity to be part of it.

[0:05:20]

**MB:** Could you talk... So in terms of, like, the work you did with the League, did that influence the work you started doing, like, when you got hired with General Motors and when you got involved with the union, like was there connection there?

**CM:** Yes. Because...I guess because of the era that I grew up in, I guess I just never got social...social activism out of my system.

**MB:** Mmhmm.

**CM:** And so, I thought being in the plant and being in the union would be a--well, first of all, it's a good-paying job. And then, it was an opportunity to be an activist. Mmhmm.

**MB:** And... So, what was your experience organizing with the union?

**CM:** Well, it was interesting because I was hired into a non-traditional job, skilled trades job. So, it was very challenging for me as a Black woman to be in the non-traditional, and I didn't always feel that the union was doing all that it could to support me and others who were breaking through those skilled trades and things like that. But on the other hand, had it not been for the union, and I probably couldn't have survived the...the work situation, you know. So... But even with all that, I was able to be active. I was chairman of my plant, unit chair. I attended a couple of conventions and things like that and always tried to, you know, just take the...what the union stood for, take it, trying to take it to a higher level.

**MB:** Mmhmm.

**CM:** Mmhmm.

[0:07:24]

**MB:** And do you...you think that your organizing with the UAW influenced, like, the organizing work that you continued to do? And if so, like, in what way?

**CM:** Well, yes, because when the... One of the things that I was taught from the League [of Revolutionary Black Workers] was that the UAW had a social responsibility, not just be representing your dues-paying members, but that they should be a social voice and a social...have a social impact on the community beyond themselves. So in that sense, I remember while I was still working, I was... One of the things I did before I retired, I was trying to get the union to embrace the single-payer healthcare system. And then in the meanwhile, there was a...a tremendous awareness about homelessness around the country, and I remember our governor John Engler abolished general assistance, so we did some homeless organizing here with the Welfare Rights Organization, and I was trying to get my

union brothers and sisters to be more attentive to that issue. So, the union was a vehicle for that and helped me frame my outlook on social justice. Mmhmm.

[0:09:00]

**MB:** Thank you. So, I think we're gonna transition a little bit...

**CM:** Mmhmm.

**MB:** ...to talking about emergency management.

**CM:** Mmhmm.

**PB:** Can you tell us a little bit about the struggle against P.A. Four [Public Act Four] and kind of the start of the Flint Democracy Defense League?

**CM:** Yes. That was really a experience that you don't forget because, I mean, I've been in rallies and things and movements and stuff, but that was a very special experience because we had to go out and get signatures to repeal Public Act Four, which was the emergency manager law, the one that allowed our governor to dispatch managers to various cities and set aside their local government, set aside their mayors and their city council people and literally take over that community. And, we called it a dictatorship law, and one of the things in trying to get signatures to repeal it and get it off the Michigan laws and going around talking to people of different communities, when we would go up to people and tell them, urging them to sign the petition, explaining to them what the law was and how it allowed people to come in and just run your city or your school district, and we had language on the petition from the law, and it would be like, people was like, "Wh..." They were just stunned that a law like that even existed. They was just unaware of it, and it was just shocking, you...you know.



And so, we were able to, with the help of one of the main drivers of that was AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees] because their... They...they really spent a lot of time and money trying to get that because their members were on the front lines of being assaulted by emergency managers who could shred their contracts and get rid of their health care. They didn't have to really collectively bargain with the unions. They could just write an edict and order certain things in the workplace. It was just, on so many levels, just...just demonic, you know. And so, they were a big force in it, but a couple of the experiences from that that was very encouraging to me was one that so many people around--and we were not paid signature gatherers. You did this because you believed in it. It wasn't...we didn't get a dollar for every...it was nothing like that. It... This was a...this was a...a campaign to get something heinous off the books in the state of Michigan. And so, we were very motivated just by the issue...and so...

But, a couple of experiences I really want to share of learning from that was there were people from all over this state that jumped on board to get rid of this law. And, I remember one of the AFSCME workers here. He would drive up to--I think it was around Traverse City [Michigan] or somewhere--but every week he would drive up there, and these white people would get stacks of signatures. They were so offended by the emergency manager law, and they had a keen sense of their democracy being taken and compromised, and that was one of the things that we was--I was--not expecting. Why? Because the emergency manager law was sold as a law to impose dictatorship on minority people, on the cities. That was the narrative. They actually said it, you know, when they were selling this law, that these minority cities didn't know how to...that...that they were...they didn't know how to run their cities, they was incompetent. I mean, I have quotes of what was actually said about why they needed to take over Detroit, why you need take over Flint, why you need take over Benton Harbor [Michigan]. And keep in mind, under the emergency manager law, over half of the African American population in Michigan has lived under emergency management at one time or another.

So, it was very race-baited and used to target African American communities, but what we had said was that there were three features of a city or a school district that attracted and...and brought in emergency manager, and one was--and some...and...and some people said, "Well, because you're a Black city or because you're a Black school district." That was just one. That was just one of the...the

criteria to be taken over. There were two more. One was high double-digit poverty rates. That was another characteristic when you look back at the cities that were taken over and the school districts that was taken over. And the third and very important feature: assets. You got water plants. You got prime real estate Lake Michigan property in Benton Harbor. So, it was assets, poverty, and minority. And those were the three dimensions of drive toward emergency manager takeover.

So, we learned that people weren't as naive as you thought they were, and people got out and got signatures. And when we finally--and there were some things that was done to disturb and deter and stop the signature drive, but finally we got it on the ballot. All but six counties said we don't want emergency manager. After all that race-baiting and making it look like Black cities and you don't know how to run a city and you can't count and you're stupid and all, every county except six said we do not want. You can't put lipstick on that pig. This is affront to democracy, and they weighed in on it and they defeated it. But of course, the lame duck session in Michigan, they tweaked it and passed it anyway, and then they made it referendum-proof.

[0:16:48]

**PB:** So can you--with that as a backdrop--can you talk a little bit about...can you explain for us exactly how the period of emergency management in Flint impacted access to safe water in the city?

**CM:** Well, it's just very simple. The emergency manager switched our water source. I mean, it's as simple as that, you know. We had an emergency manager, and there were powers-that-be who decided that they wanted to secure access to our water rights, build a new pipeline, make fund--make money for the bond market. Our water right now is... We are under the clutches of the bond market with our water, and that's why we have said we know who poisoned us, but that's what poisoned us is the drive from the J.P. Morgans, Drysdale, Wells Fargo. Those are the ones and those are not easy to see, and we really had to do some digging to see what's...what's unseen. We see the discolored water. We smell the discolored water, but we don't see who the enemy is.

[0:18:28]

**PB:** How did you find out? What did...what did that digging process look like? How did you find out who the enemy was?

**CM:** Well, we...we knew that the... We could look at all the experiences around the state with the schools, with the cities, and we could see that corporate interests were benefiting from the emergency manager system. The emergency manager system was a conduit and a tool to steal assets from these cities. It could take the form of privatization or outright corporate takeover. So, we began to see that there was a pattern there. Now, how it expressed itself directly in Flint, we really had to do some...some digging. But, you could go to any city that was under emergency management and see one or another corporate interest benefiting from that system. It could be Whirlpool in Benton Harbor, you know. It was Mosaica in Muskegon Heights [Michigan] who took over the schools. The emergency manager came in. He abolished the public school system, brought in Mosaica, a private education firm. So these experiences, we could see that this was a...a corporate grab of the assets of different communities, and they used the race issue to try to deflect and deter people from seeing the real issue at hand, but that was why we were so encouraged that the people in the state of Michigan rejected that you couldn't play race card on them and make them think they was doing something good for democracy. All up in the Upper Peninsula and everywhere, they said, "No. We do not want emergency management in Michigan." And, there's no minorities up there in the Upper Peninsula of any count.

[0:20:53]

**PB:** So where were all those people when the lame duck passed, [Public Act] 436? What happened to that opposition?

**CM:** Well, the...the...the...the avenue to challenge it was gone. You know, the...the petition drive... Okay, if you hadn't had a...a petition to repeal Public Act Four, you would never know how people felt about the issue because there was no avenue to express your resistance to it, you know. And so once the lame duck came in and they made it referendum-proof, it was sort of hard to...there was no Plan B on the part of the combatants to take this to the next level. But that being said, there's so much potential in this state among the people. We need an organization and an avenue for people to come together.

[0:22:00]

**PB:** What are some of the major ways that Flint has been impacted by emergency management in the city?

**CM:** Mmhmm. Okay, well of course, the...we were...our water--and it's pretty common knowledge about Flint has been poisoned. 100,000 people have been poisoned when the water was switched to the Flint River and control...corrosion control was not used. As a result, we all got poisoned. And the...and we... and five years later--and that was on April 25, 2014--and we still living with that. We still don't have clean water. We still paying some of the highest water rates in the country. The bond people has not missed one payment. They get paid, and we are running around here getting our water shut off with water we can't even use. So, we can talk about water rights and...and corporate rights and...and inhumane public officials, but these have human consequences that we are still living with, those policies.

[0:23:42]

**MB:** So, I want to talk about the water shutoffs piece.

**CM:** Mm.

**MB:** But before I get to that, can you tell us a little bit about how you got started, how you made that transition from emergency management...

**CM:** Mmhmm.

**MB:** ...to picking up water organizing?

**CM:** Okay. Well, after the emergency manager campaign, the signatures and then the voters in Michigan voting to get rid of emergency manager, then came the lame duck session to put--pass Public Act 436, which is Public Act 4, emergency manager law, tweaked a little bit. So after that, those of us that had been working on that issue felt like we needed to stay together--something I wish we could have did statewide, you know. But, we did in Flint. We decided that since this law is here and since we got an emergency manager--This predated the water switch. This was around 2011, 2012. The water was switched in 2014. But after the setback in the fight to abolish the emergency manager law, we felt like we had to create a group to come together and to continue to resist emergency management in our own local community and its effects.

And, there was a lot of things done before the water switch here in Flint in terms of emergency manager powers that they used to just dismantle a lot of our public. They...they've gotten rid of our...some of our public parks. They got rid of our 9-1-1 system. They got rid of our garbage trucks. They privatized our garbage. We even had a thing... They sold Santa Claus, and we made a big deal out of that because the Santa Claus that's put out every year on top of City Hall was sold. I mean, they just went in there like hatchet people, getting rid of public assets. And so, we had a little campaign going on about Santa Claus and one of the women, Melodee Mabbitt, decided that she was gon do a campaign to purchase Santa Claus 'cause they were auctioning it. So, she created a fundraiser so that she could purchase Santa Claus. And so, we all got together and bought Santa Claus and put it in storage and said when we get our democracy back, we can bring Santa Claus back. So, that's the kind of public stuff we was doing to, you know, just expose what was going on.

[0:26:43]

**MB:** Can you talk a little bit about what's...what the...what some of the water organizing looked like? Like, so...yeah.

**CM:** Well...what the water organizing look like? Well, there were demonstrations downtown. It sort of took the form of, like, slowly-but-surely building because when they first switched the water, we had no clue of what was...what was happening. They had a big ceremony, and the mayor pushed a button, and they gonna...and...and people were like... Just off of instinct, if you live here in Flint, you like, we don't want to be on no Flint River water. It was cars and General Motors pollutants and dead bodies and all. Just, the river was just not something... The idea of us using that as a source of water was just... It was a turn-off from the beginning, but we still assumed that they were doing...taking the necessary precautions to make sure it was safe. And, it was supposed to be just a transition time, you know, to get off the Detroit water and transition to this great, the latest and greatest new pipeline, and nobody's ever been able, to this day, to answer the question: if we are so fiscally strapped that you had to send in an emergency manager, how can you afford a new pipeline? We don't have the money, so you got an emergency manager here. So, how can you afford to enter into a contract to purchase a new pipeline? Nobody's answered that question yet.

So...so, the Democracy Defense League quickly morphed into Democracy Defense League water warriors, you know. Again, we had come together just to stand up against being under...living under dictatorship, and we never laid down and dreamed we would be challenged with something of this magnitude, and we met people that we never would have met otherwise because people who got energized and involved with the water fight were not the same people who were involved with the Democracy...with the resistance to emergency management. So, this was a whole new base of people, and we began communicating with each other, and we went to Lansing [Michigan] and... So, there were a number of things, lawsuits, but one of the things that we do every year, on April 25 we try to come together to declare that the water crisis is still alive and well, you know. And so...

**MB:** So, is April 25 what y'all mark as the start of the water crisis in Flint?

**CM:** Mmhmm. Mmhmm. That's when they switched it. Mmhmm.

[0:30:33]

**MB:** [clears throat] So, in your opinion, do you see a connection between... Oh, speaking of water shutoffs.

**CM:** Mmhmm.

**MB:** So, I guess how has water shutoffs entered the conversation in terms of...

**CM:** Well, even before the emergency manager--or just before the emergency manager--they were raising the water rates. Now, previous local administrations were using the water fund as a debit card to pay for other things and they... You know, there was a... The water was an asset for them as well. But after a while, it be--it got out of hand, and water, water bills were a challenge before the switch. It was beginning to, but it didn't get any better after the switch. There was a temporar--several months where the state compensated residents through paying some of the water bills or whatever. They...they gave the city so much money to lower our water rates because we couldn't use the water, so that's how they helped compensate, but that's gone. We begin--and everything trickled out slowly because we all know that the state never owed up to their role in what happened. It took them a long time to even admit there was a problem. As water warriors, we take credit for bringing this issue even to the national attention. They wasn't gonna bring it up. We were bringing it up. The water smells. My hair's falling out. I'm breaking out in rashes. People are beginning to wa--you know, to more and more be vocal and stuff. And so, what we say is through our energies and our efforts, we was able to even put the water crisis in Flint on the national stage. We finally got national attention in January of 2016.

And, I remember being in January of 2015 when we were beginning to say something is wrong with this water. Now, we didn't know about lead and all that. I had the opportunity to speak in Detroit where they had brought the United Nations in, and it was a community gathering, and so I was asked to come and speak about what was going on in Flint, and I remember one of the things I shared with them was that General Motors in October--now, our water was switched in April 2015, I mean [20]14. That October of the same year, General Motors said we can't take it no more. This water is rusting our engine parts. That was about six months of being on the water. The emergency manager and the state allowed General Motors to go back to the Detroit system, and we had to stay on the Flint system. And when I shared that with that audience, a woman came up to me. She said, "I cannot believe what you...what you just shared." She said she googled it on her phone 'cause she didn't believe it that they would allow General Motors to go back to Detroit when the water was rusting engine parts right over there at the engine plant on the south side of Flint. They was allowed to switch. And when we confronted the emergency manager at that time--we've had different ones, but Darnell Earley, who rarely came out in public setting but he was over at University of Michigan--and we challenged him about that. How can you let General Motors off of this water that's so corrosive and allow the residents to continue to use the water? And he said, and I quote, "That's apples and oranges." That's apples and oranges. So, that's how ruthless this situation became.

And again, that was before we knew anything about lead. It wasn't until one of the residents here, LeeAnne Walters, a housewife and, you know. And you know, people were bathing their children. Their children were breaking out in stuff, and so she got on the phone and started...she went, took her kids to the doctors. They couldn't understand why they were breaking out and blah blah blah, but one thing led to another, and she's the one that...she was one of the people who helped make the water crisis a game-changer as far as bringing the issue out because she got a hold to the Environmental Protection Agency Region Five out of Chicago, and she lucked up and spoke with Miguel Del Toral, and he was one of the good guys in the agency and said something is wrong. And then from there, one thing led to another. Then, Dr. Mona [Hanna-]Attisha and different ones, you know, was just...and Marc Edwards came here. We went out, and we were citizen scientists. We collected water. We were trying to alarm the people that the water wasn't safe even though the authorities were saying, "Your water's fine. Don't worry. Just relax!" And we were out there getting samples so that the people would know, and that was a big challenge.



In...in all of these issues, whether you talking about the union movement or whatever, one of the biggest challenges you have is to make the people aware and raise the consciousness of the people. And that go--whatever you're doing and whatever you're trying to do, you...that's...that's a challenge. Why? Because the powers-that-be are creating their own narratives and putting 'em out there, and they have access to the television, they have access to the...the talk shows, and they have access... So, they put their own narrative out there. And so as an activist, trying to change the narrative because people did not know their water was not safe because the mayor told you it was fine. You know. So, that's all a part of... But eventually, the biggest breakthrough I could say was people were beginning to catch on something wasn't right in Flint, and we did those... We called ourselves citizen scientists and went around and gathered water, you know, samples for... And finally, with Marc Edwards from Virginia Tech [Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University], it blew up from there. And then Dr. Mona came in, and then they told her she was slicing and dicing statistics.

You know, so it's always that narrative out there by the powers-that-be to undo or...or try to supplant and suppress just causes. Mmhmm. So, we went through that, too. We didn't just wake up one day and say, well, the water's not safe. No. We have been seeing it since 2014, but in January of 2016--16!--Sincere [Smith] showed up on the cover of Time Magazine, and the media blackout was broken. So, breaking the media blackout is something that we claim victory for even exposing the problem, and we're still in the phases of trying to, what, fix the problem, but that was a victory to just even make it known.

[0:40:06]

**MB:** [clears throat] In terms of, like, the narrative piece, right, in how the state creates its own narratives to further its own agenda, ...

**CM:** Mmhmm.

**MB:** ...could you talk a little bit more about the work y'all did to kind of talk about the issue with the water being poisoned but then connect it back to, like, this larger agenda and, like, the way it speaks to like corporate value--corporate... corporate...corporations being prioritized, for instance, over people? Like, what did it look like to...or how did y'all have those conversations with people to, like, kind of get to that?

**CM:** Well, we're still having those conversations with people because people want to--and rightfully so--blame the governor, Governor [Rick] Snyder, blame the MDEQ [Michigan Department of Environmental Quality]. We had some successf--successes in Washington, D.C. when they held hearings on the Flint water system. So, a lot of exposure happened as a result of that. But as far as the corporate con...con...connections, that's an ongoing challenge that we have--just like we had the challenge of convincing people not to drink the water. We...we've got to show people and shine the light of day on the system that brought us to that point. And so, that's an ongoing challenge that we have.

[0:41:54]

**MB:** Can you talk a little bit more... So, you mentioned the...when the UN [United Nations] came over and held that community space to talk about what was happening with water.

**CM:** Mmhmm.

**MB:** Could you talk a little bit more about other connections in organizing with Detroit and Flint...

**CM:** Mmhmm.

**MB:** ...specifically with water?

**CM:** Well, I mean, we've almost had an inseparable relationship with Detroit because it's so many similar experiences that we having but with a common cause of the privatization of water, of water becoming a commodity. You know, those are common consequences of what we're going through. And so, we...we...we're all the time back-and-forth with Detroit and Flint and, you know, partnering to do certain things. We...we go to Lansing for different things, but we run into Detroit--I mean, we've...we've developed camaraderie around this, this common issue of water in a state surrounded by the Great Lakes. The last thing we should have to worry about is water. That's the least...that should be the least of our challenges in getting through life is how I'm gonna get some water. That's just crazy, you know. And, if we're not careful and if we don't do as much as we can to awaken the awareness of our residents--all, not just in Flint and Detroit, but all over this state and this country--we gonna wake up one day and see Lake Michigan, Inc., Lake Ontario, Ltd., Lake Superior, Corp., and this is where it's heading.

[0:44:12]

**MB:** Can you name some of the organizations or people that you collaborated with with organizing?

**CM:** Well, as far as the water issue is concerned, the challenge in being involved with the water fight was there was no organized, established group or place or entity in which to function. When we had... When I was a UAW member, the UAW was already there. All I had to do was get involved, you know. But, getting involved in an established organization and trying to create organizations because of new circumstances and new challenges is a very different thing. So, what we had was like-minded residents just cobbling ourselves together and trying to form some kind of organizational structure to confront this public health disaster. And so, that was a little bit different, you know.

So, we have...we've had good relationships with some of the pastors. We've had good relationships with...we've had support from our union community but not as much as we should have, you know. So, we have had to kinda collaborate with those established organizations, but really the idea of an organization forming to

both fight for democracy and fight for water is just...the whole idea of it is just...it's almost unthinkable because why? Why would you have to fight for water? Why would you have...what do you mean you're fighting for democracy? You know? So, this...that whole concept represents the era in which we live that's different from the organizing drives of unions in the [19]30s. Workplace--you don't have a workplace. You don't have an established group. Well, here's the--you got...you want to fight for water rights? They got their office over here on Fifth Street. Just go there and join up, you know. No. We trying to create this...this structure to enhance this movement that we're...that we didn't choose, a fight that we did not pick.

[0:47:23]

**MB:** Could you... So, you talked about like the... Right, you had to basically do rapid response to like what was happening and, like, quickly form...

**CM:** Mmhmm.

**MB:** ...this thing in transition.

**CM:** Mmhmm.

**MB:** And so what does, like, organizing look like now given that it's still an issue?

**CM:** Well, what it looks like now is that, like, for example, because the enemy is still busy. The devil is still busy, so they haven't, like, took their marbles and went home. They still haven't. They have...there's much work to do to re...reconstruct the damage that they have done. But also, they're busy because one of the things that Flint did that we claim victory for--and I...I told you we got finally busted through the media blackout. But not only that, it made people all over this country pay attention to their water. I mean, I was out in California, and I was reading an article--and I was out there to speak about this water crisis in Flint--and

I was reading an article in the paper and this...this one school, high school, the parents said, "Well, wait a minute, we want you to check...check the water. Is the water," you know. After Flint, everybody went, "Wait, wait, let me check my water," you know. So, they were out there, and it was a very well-to-do high school, right on the...up in the mountains or something, you know, Beverly Hill-type school. And so, the parents were confronting the...the administration and said, "We want to make sure that our water is safe." And they said, "Oh, our... Oh, the water's fine. You have nothing to worry about." And the parents said, "That's what they told Flint," you know. So, it's...

And then now, Newark, New Jersey is going through a disaster. It's almost like the cloth has been cut how you deal with this. First, just give 'em a little water. Then, downplay that it's not that bad and behbehbeh. You know, we can almost tell them this what's gonna happen next. You know, so they giving 'em two cases of water per family a week. They did us like that, you know. And so, this is gonna be a challenge all over this country, and I think now the way they're treating us...they... It's almost like we can't let the Flint experience end into reconciliation and reconstruction because if we do, then we're gonna have to do it all over this country.

And so, the latest thing that happened here is there's a doctor at Hurley Hospital [Hurley Medical Center], Dr. [Hernan] Gomez, who came out with a report last year, and he...he...he...he published an opinion piece in the New York Times, and in that opinion piece, he said, "Well, the children in Flint weren't really poisoned. They were just exposed to the lead." And so, this is at the same time that the state is beginning to withdraw the bottled water program from Flint. So, here the narrative continues. And...and just recently, he's coming out with an article saying that a lot of the miscarriages and stillbirths were not...that it's extremely unlikely that it had anything to do with the water. So, they already going back to that old narrative of trying to minimize what was done to us, you know. And so, we're going back. We've been going back and forth with the state because they say, "Well, okay, we're gonna give you some water then. Oh, your water's fine now. We're gonna take it away." Even if the water is pure as the driven snow, we have so many health impacts and health effects that we will be living with this for years to come.

Now, our groups have come together--and like, there were a number of groups that popped up all over Flint. We had one group called Flint Water Class Action, Florissa Fowler, and...and what she does is she has a kickass website that she posts everything dealing with Flint and the water and...and related subjects. And then, we have groups, Water You Fighting For. We have the Flint Rising. So it's...it's several...it's a number of groups, and so we collaborate periodically on what's the latest and the greatest challenge that we gonna have to confront. And we did--and we do things, it's no ki--it's no regular thing like we showed up at the...in Lansing for the lame duck session because if you--where they attempted to strip Dana Nessel's power from her. They were gonna let the legislature decide which cases that she could litigate. Well, we got a case going on now that's not been settled about the water. So, if we let y'all... Y'all are the ones that poisoned us, so if we sit here and let y'all decide what cases you might just throw...you might just throw Flint's case in the paper shredder, so we have to go down there and fight to protect the Attorney General. You know, things like that that's not everything as directly related, but it has an impact on our future. And, what this doctor is doing now. There hasn't been anybody tried and convicted for the Flint water crisis, and we have not been compensated as far as damages for what has happened to us. So, we still in the thick of the fight.

And, I just want to tell you before I forget: in year two of the crisis, we came up with some demands that we wanted to put a down payment on restoring... So, everything go in stages. At first, we were just talking about, "Well, my hair and my...my, you know, rash." People, families, Legionella died and, you know, it's been a lot of... But okay, now, what do we want to fix it? So, in year two we had this, okay, now what? We got to tell these people what we want. We want expanded Medicare for all impacted residents, and there's no reason they can't do it. Why? Because they did it for this little town in Montana called Libby, Libby, Montana. They had a vermic--vermiculite plant and a mine that people went to work there, and they inhaled all of those poisonous chemicals, poisonous dust, and they brought 'em home, and they poisoned their families, and they poisoned their wives and children when they came in the house, and they had all that, and it was inhaled. And in the Affordable Care Act, a provision was put in there for Libby, Montana for MediCare for all impacted residents. Medicare, as we know, usually set aside for age 65. This was regardless of age, lifetime medical care and expanded medical care with special needs because of special illnesses that you get from being poisoned, and this is what we wanted for Flint, and we still demanding that for Flint.

[0:56:05]

**MB:** Can you talk... So, we talked a little bit, or you mentioned some of the connections you saw like even in other places like thinking about...think you mentioned like Newark?

**CM:** Yes.

**MB:** What is your...what's your analysis of, like, why water, why now? Like, why...why these patterns of [inaudible] organizing?

**CM:** Well...well, I think--and I don't, you know, I haven't did a deep dive into that, but number one is people weren't paying--haven't been paying--attention to it. It... These things might have been lurking for years, but our infrastructure--and everybody admits that the infrastructure in this country is falling apart. It... I mean, when the...the Industrial Age and all of these pipes and things were put in to...to...to service industry, and those things are...are just deteriorating. And so even though our water was poisoned through lack of proper treatment, we still need some infrastructure done aside from that, the infrastructure. This is...this city was a city full of industrial plants and everything else, and so we just need to clean up our environment and clean up our infrastructure. And then, I think that's one... Yeah, I think the infrastructure's a big part and just awareness. Look, we are becoming more and more aware of environmental and water issues. We... This issue around PFAS [Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances] is...is emerging, and that's a big problem in Michigan, you know. So, I think it's just...part of it is because things are falling apart, and part of it is because people weren't paying attention. We just took these things for granted, you know.

And then, we're also not cognizant of corporate interests and looking at water as an asset. And if you don't look at water as a human right, then you will be accepting of someone saying, "Okay, I got your water," you know. "I'm...I'm...I'm providing you with your water." But, you...but you have to have the mentality that

says, wait a minute. Water is life. Water is a human right. So, you have to have that mindset in order to pay attention to that type of stuff. Mmhmm.

[0:58:58]

**MB:** I have one more question, and then I'm gonna transition to Peter [Blackmer]. But, you mentioned something with that about the having to have as a value that water is a human right.

**CM:** Mmhmm.

**MB:** Is that something that was a part of, like, the conversations you were having with people to, like, change the narrative of, like, telling people about what it means [inaudible] water?

**CM:** Yes, it...it...it de... But, it kind of developed as...as the fight went on because the immediate thing was, "Oh my God, I'm being poisoned with this water." So, you wasn't thinking in the...in the big grand scheme of things about water is a human right and all those types of things because you were thinking about, "What am I gonna do to get away from this water?," you know. So, it was just like a step-by-step process of...of because once you find out why you were poisoned and what...what poisoned you, then you begin to develop those ideas of water is a human right, the idea that water is life, the idea that no one should own water as a property right.

**MB:** Thank you.

[1:00:24]

**PB:** I want to foll--come back to some of the demands and the...



**CM:** Okay.

**PB:** I was really struck by what you said about, you know, if the powers-that-be gave to any kind of restoration or providing justice to Flint, then there would be a domino effect 'cause they'd have to follow suit and recognize that there is culpability. So, but within that, I'm curious: in your mind what would justice look like for Flintstones?

**CM:** Well, somebody asked me that not too long ago, and I said--and I wasn't happy with my answer, but that's what I said at the time--is that I don't know what it would look like, but I know it when I see it. [laughs] Just, type of thing. So, but I can tell you what we say we want as a down payment on justice, and that is the...the healthcare piece, the abolition of emergency management because dictatorship brought us here. We wanted to be declared a disaster area. What they pitched to us was we're gonna declare you an emergency. You're an emergency. No, we want to be declared a disaster area. Those have different meanings in terms of money and status as far as reparations and things like that. Because with emergency, they use revolving funds or revolving loans, and they send it to the state, and the state is the fiduciary, and the city have to get with the state to spend the money that the feds granted. No, we don't want that. We want do not pass go, go directly to Flint through a disaster area. Bring the Army Corps of Engineers in here. We coulda been and had these pipes replaced. Now, now you got the state over the money, and then the city hire contractors, and they haggling about who gonna get the bid. Cut all that out! Bring the Army Corps of Engineer here and pull these poisonous pipes up out the ground. So, we demanded disaster relief.

And also, they coulda brought in water buffalos and things like that to provide water for the people instead of sitting up in the line for two hours back-to-back cars to get a couple of cases of water. And we have learned through learning, learning as you learn, plastic bottles is not environmentally friendly anyway. So, we don't want to be trying to use our emergency to be undermining environment. You know, so, it's just a mess. So, we had been demanding that we be a disaster area, not emergency, you know, and we wanted education provisions, smaller class sizes, counselors and nurses in the schools. There has been a...a devastating

impact on children. Now, we got children--this is five, going on six years. We've got children who don't know what it's like to go to the tap and turn on the tap and get a glass of water. They've been on bottled water all their life.

[1:04:13]

**PB:** Since you mentioned, you know, the declaration of emergency, right, there's a federal declaration, right. What does it mean to you, what are we all supposed to take away from this that all of this was taking place while Barack Obama was in office?

**CM:** Well, not only was it taking place while Barack Obama was in office, Barack Obama came to Flint and drank some water. Now, we don't know if it was Flint water, but he telegraphed the message that the water's fine in Flint 'cause his experts told him it was, and he came to Flint right up there at Northwestern High School, and he started trying to clear his throat [makes throat clearing sound], and he drank water right here in Flint. So again, he telegraphed the message that the crisis in Flint is not as dire as what you may have been led to believe. So, that's another part of the narrative. And we started out with that, your water's fine! There's nothing wrong with your water!

**PB:** I also have a personal interest in asking about Newark because I used to live there, and I was just there last weekend. This is what everybody's talking about in the city. So, what you mentioned before, like, you can pretty much see the script and how this plays out...

**CM:** Mmhmm.

**PB:** ...in other cities. What advice would you give to folks that are impacted by lead in the water, whether that's in Newark or, you know, any other city...

**CM:** Mmhmm.

**PB:** ...that's being impacted right now in terms of how to respond...

**CM:** Mm.

**PB:** ...to that based on what you've learned?

**CM:** Mmhmm. Well, the...in general, I'd be... I'd love to share some of our experiences and our demands with them and to not--not to say they'd have to pick up the same demands, but through this experience, these are some things that we've come up with that we must have in order to really resolve the problem while the powers-that-be and their government representatives are saying, "Okay, we'll give you this and..." No, we want you to give us this! This is what we need. And when you first go through it, you don't even know what you need! I mean, you just want somebody to fix the water, so they come with these supposedly solutions that are not solutions, you know. Like, the governor is...they issued bott--they spent a lot of money on bottled water. We want our...we want tap-ready water. That's what we want. And one of the things I would suggest is that, and... and...is to make them fix the problem. We do not want to continue to live on bottled water. We want our water tap-ready, and whatever you got to do to do that, this is what you have to go for. Because then, like they did us, they gave us bottled water, and then they took it away, and they created the narrative that they had at the beginning that the water's fine, da de da de da, no, nothing to see there, you know, and they wean them off the water and then just hope it goes away, you know.

[1:07:48]

**PB:** Given that this is...this crisis is still going on in Flint and recognizing how far you've come in your organizing work, is there--this is kind of like asking about lessons that you've learned--is there anything that you or other organizers could have done differently over the past five years that could have expedited a resolution to this crisis?

**CM:** Mm. That's an interesting question. I think we should have did more to pressure the federal side of the situation because in two of our demands, the healthcare piece and the disaster, those are federal. And we spent a lot of tent--attention and time on the governor, and we should have put a lot more energy into the federal and took our demands to there. Now, we did share our demands with our congressional representatives, but we should have launched a more aggressive battle.

And... But, the other thing is we didn't know what we didn't know, you know. I mean, we...we learned as we went, you know. So, we learned about Libby, Montana, and the only way I found out about that--not...not me but us as a group found out about that--is because some of us was involved in the group called...a group called Healthcare NOW. I had mentioned earlier that I had been an advocate for single-payer even as I was a union member, and I learned through being a participant in that, and we learned about Libby, Montana. And so, we never dreamt that we would be in the situation where we... And of course, it wouldn't be just Flint would benefit from it because you'd have lifetime, regardless of age, medical attention. This is what we need. But, the other thing about it is it could be a model for healthcare around the country, you know, about as far as that. So, it would be another benefit, just like exposing the water was a benefit to people around the country who began to pay attention to their own water, you know.

[1:10:26]

**PB:** And, I mean, my other question is about Darnell Earley. Like, he wreaked havoc here in Flint...

**CM:** Mmhm.

**PB:** ...and then goes on to Detroit to be the emergency man--financial manager of the public school system.

**CM:** Mmhmm.

**PB:** Were there any conversations taking place between you all in Flint and folks in Detroit about he's coming and here's what you should know about this guy or anything like that?

**CM:** No, because we hadn't built up relationships at that time with Detroit like that. I mean, we had friends, you know, Welfare Rights and things, but we hadn't established that synergy with Detroit. And, the other thing is the...the Detroit school system been under emergency management for a while, you know. And it...and...and that's the other thing that kind of made it different, too, that it was a school system versus a city, you know, and... We just, you know, I just... If I...if I could look back on this whole emergency manager, water, cities, and all, I would say that we coulda been more aggressive in after we had the momentum behind the defeated emergency manager law. If we could have had an avenue to connect all these people, these good people who...who...who did the right thing, who saw the hype, you know, and built on that, you know, and....

But, as I say when I give talks--and it's the same thing with Newark, and you can see the people from all over the country gonna come and help those people in Newark. And, they did it in Flint. They drove up from Chicago in not-so-nice new cars, and they brought water up here. And I was... One Saturday I was going in my house, and somebody pulled up in a big white van. They say, "Ma'am, you need some water?" I say, "I sure do," and I say, "Where are y'all from?" And he said, "Milwaukee, Wisconsin." Now, that's a long way. I said, "Okay, then. Thank you." But--and I remember a friend of mine who moved to Ann Arbor, and her grandson told her, "Grandmama, I want to help the kids in Flint." He sent his allowance down here to the school, to the Board of Education so they could buy water for the kids. Eight years old.

So, I'm...I'm saying that to say when...when the... The people around this country have a high moral standard. Our government doesn't, has a low moral standard. So, we gonna have to fight for a government that is reflective of the morality of

the people, and that is that you take care of humanity. We don't have that right now, and we're gonna have to fight for it, regardless of who gonna be the President because that's...that's who we are. I know that's who we are because I saw it in Flint from all over everywhere. And people of modest means! I mean, some of those people were driving up here from Chicago. They had those what we used to call hoopty cars. [laughs] You know, they wasn't no flashy limousines and stuff. So that's... At the end of the day, that's what we have to go for.

[1:14:44]

**MB:** So, I want to transition back to talking about your organizing experience.

**CM:** Mmhm.

**MB:** And, I'm wondering if you can share your opinion on whether or not--or how--race and gender and being a Black woman impacted your organizing, ...

**CM:** Mmhm.

**MB:** ...the way you went about it, ...

**CM:** Mmhmm.

**MB:** ...how...how people interacted with you, just...?

**CM:** Mmhm. Well, a couple of things on that. One was that--as I shared earlier--in the...in the campaign to re--to a...amend--repeal, I'm sorry--in the campaign to repeal Public Act Four, the emergency manager law--and the way that law was promoted was that we can get these Black people in line. They so out of hand, and they so incompetent, and blah blah blah blah blah. It didn't work! That just

didn't...that just didn't fly with the people in Michigan! So, that was an ah-hah moment as far as your perspective on who you think is gon be with you and who not. So, that was enlightening.

And then, the other thing is that the city of Flint has been--See, Flint is not like Benton Harbor, like 90 percent Black. We are like 54 percent Black. And so...and--but extremely segregated, very segregated, and that's... That has historical reasons for that, and that's by design. But, the water crisis helped bring folks together who ordinarily would not...paths would not cross in their neighborhoods and things. So, I think it has helped to promote more humanity among people than it once did.

Now, as far as me being an African American woman, a Black woman, in certain situations, I remember a friend of mine talking about the race question, and she said when she go to work every day, she said, "I get up in the morning, and I wash my face, and I put my clothes on," and she say, "I don't know I'm Black till I come in here. [snorts] I don't think about being Black till I walk in here. Then, you let me know, you Black," you know. So, we do have those situations to overcome and fight, you know. That being said, when they pushed the button over there at the water treat--at the...at the...at the plant, that water did not segregate itself. That wasn't no Black water, and it wasn't no white water. It was toxic water, and they...it went everywhere.

[1:18:30]

**MB:** Thank you. [clears throat] So, there are a lot of other Black women who have also been leaders in trying to organize for water that's safe and affordable. Are there any who have influenced you or any special collaborations that you've had with other Black women working on water, on the water crisis?

**CM:** Well, we have had... Well, I mentioned to you Bishop Bernadel Jefferson. You probably already know Naira Sharif? We had Carrie Younger[-Nelson] work with us quite a bit, and she was one of the ones that helped with the water samplings and stuff. And this is... This was important, too. Sometimes, you...you're put in

situations together non-intentionally because we all live in our own little, you know, worlds, but when we were gathering the samples to test the quality of the water, those samples came from all over the city, and I was proud of that, that it wasn't concentrated in...in just certain areas. And also, there's a class aspect to this, too, because it was Dr. Mona [Hanna-Attisha] and other people that's high...more higher profile than the little housewife over there on the south side that helped give it attention. You know, so, we...we deal with these things in our society, you know. Well, if doctor said it, it must, you know. But no, it was a little housewife on the south side that...that brought it out. You know.

[1:20:49]

**MB:** Thank you. And so, in relation to that--or actually, can you talk a little bit more about... Yeah, 'cause to me what you're speaking to is like the folks because of, like, their identity being seen as, like, read more legitimate...

**CM:** Yes. Mmhm.

**MB:** So, can you talk about, I guess, some of the strategies? Like when...when y'all started to see that happening, like how did you push back?

**CM:** I'm trying to think of an example... Well, I'll give you an example of strategizing around that is some of the pastors here had begun to go to Lansing. We have a group here called Concerned Pastors, and some of them got together, and they took the initiative to say, no, we're gonna do something about this water, or we're gonna confront the governor [Rick Snyder] about it. So they...they began to have a couple of meetings in Lansing. And so after they went to, I don't know, maybe two or three meetings, they decided, you know, we need to get--Now, see it's...it's...it's two...it's...it's a...it's...it's a layered thing here. You're pastors, and you going up to Lansing, you're gonna have two or three meetings. They realize--and they were African American pastors--and they realize we better bring some people up here with us from the community, Black and white, for credibility. That we...that we are...we are connected with the community, and we know what we talking about when we come up here. So, that was sort of like a conscious



thing where they invited myself and some others along with some white community activists in the water. And we...we came up there, and so it made it seem like you're not here just talking to Black pastors for the Black--no, this is a community-wide effort. So, they made a conscious decision to portray the problem as it really existed so they wouldn't be pigeon-holed or stereotyped in...in their...in their meetings up there. Mmhm.

[1:23:24]

**MB:** When we speak about... When you're talking about, like, that type of just, like, crossing, like, racial barriers, ...

**CM:** Mmhm.

**MB:** ...did that open up or spark other conversations, for instance about, like, the segregation in Flint, like with those types of collaborations?

**CM:** Not...not...not particularly, but one of the things that's happened within the last year or two is a book has come out about Flint called Demolition Means Progress, and I...I was born and raised in Flint, but I didn't really know Flint until I read that book, and that book goes way back to the historical events that led to the, just, segregation of this city and how it got to where it's at. And it's really... When you got something, an issue that you all share in common, it's really challenging to be segregated like that, and it takes time for trusting and all that kind of stuff that you have to work through, you know.

**MB:** Mmhm.

**CM:** And, so. But, the book helped me get a big picture of it and how the...the stakeholders and corporate interests facilitated and manipulated that, just like they tried to do with emergency manager. They used that, but they used it for what purpose? Because they hate Black people? No! They used it to steal assets

from the city. So, we have to learn how to fight on different levels. Like Sun Tzu said, who, "Know thy enemy, know thyself." Now, you can... If you don't...if you don't get that right, you're gonna go down the path to defeat. And asking ourselves--from some of my mentors and different things over the years and asking yourself--when something happens, who benefits? Because some people came to town and said they tried to poison this Black city. Well, everybody got poisoned, you know. Everybody got poisoned, and we didn't have time to...to sort all that out when you're...you're...you're dying.

[1:26:38]

**MB:** So, I want to switch a little bit to talking about a little bit about, like, Black women's organizing, and I also...

**CM:** Mmhm.

**MB:** ...want to talk a little bit about Mama Lila [Cabbil].

**CM:** Mmhm.

**MB:** So, one of the things that...that particularly kind of like drove me to making sure that I was able to have this conversation with you...

**CM:** Mmhm.

**MB:** ...was previous conversations I had with Mama Lila before she passed about...

**CM:** Mm.

**MB:** ...wanting to document the organizing that Black women were doing...

**CM:** Okay. Mmhm.

**MB:** ...around water. And so, I am hoping that you can share... And so, Mama, one of the things that...that came out of that conversation was her making a list of Black women that she knew and thought it would be important to speak to...

**CM:** Mmhm.

**MB:** ...in order to document Black women's organizing around water.

**CM:** Mmhm.

**MB:** So, I'm hoping you could talk a little bit about...a little bit about your relationship to her and what you knew about her. And also, like, how do you see yourself fitting into, like, a tradition of Black women's organizing--or do you? Or like, what do you...Yeah.

**CM:** Well, throughout my activism years, I have and...and affiliate with Black organizations. In the UAW--and as I mentioned we had the Black Work--you know, League of Revolutionary Black Workers. You had...we had a...a Black caucus over in the UAW. Women's, they had a women's committee and different... So, you have special issues that you have to confront, and so you...you...you collaborate with those in those same situations. When you are confronted with an issue and you know why it's being done and you know why you're being poisoned, you have to reach beyond your inner-circle family that you always rely on and retreat to to share experiences. You have to figure out a way to go beyond that because you know you can't win if you try to insulate and isolate, you know. And, two things can be true at the same time, as we were talking about earlier. Over half of the Black population in Michigan lived under emergency management. That is a issue

as far as the strategy of the governor and the corporate interests. In order to steal assets, they targeted us. So, that's real! But, everybody involved in democracy have to learn that lesson! That doesn't... That lesson ain't just for us! That lesson is for everybody who want to get out from under this mess we living in!

And as I shared before, I would not have known the moral consciousness of Michigan citizens if we hadn't put that on the ballot. And they was like, oh no, no, no, no, no, no. No. No, that's dictatorship. We...we not with that. We're not with that. So, I...I guess what I'm saying is is that because history relegated us to certain situations, and we have to learn how to collaborate and unite with those in a common situation in order to survive, but we also have to know how to take our cause into the broader society in order to win.

[1:31:34]

**MB:** And can you share--[clears throat] thank you--and can you share a little bit about how you knew Mama Lila [Cabbil]?

**CM:** Well, I met her because after we were going through our water situation, they had a big...they had a big confer--they have conferences all the time in Detroit, big, you know. And they had this big water conference, and some of the women from here said we need to have a march from Detroit to Flint. And so...and it stopped in Pontiac and, you know. But anyway, that's when I met Mama Lila, when it...when that march arrived in Detroit. I had seen her before, but I didn't know her. And when that march arrived in Flint--and they had spent the night at this church [Woodside Church in Flint where the interview was filmed]--but it wasn't... This church was in a different location--and the...the...this church offered to let them sleep there, you know. And so, the next morning they met up in front of city hall and had a rally, and Mama Lila had brought flowers to give everybody that was an activist, a little, just a little bouquet of pretty flowers. She had that touch about her, that nurturing is what I called it, nurturing touch. Mmhmm. Mmhmm.

[1:33:02]

**MB:** Thank you. Can you talk about--so, kind of switching back to organizing. Can you talk about were there any memorable wins when you were doing, like, water organizing work, like?

**CM:** Not like we had when we had the emergency manager stuff. We had the emergency manager, there was a victory win when we was in court and the judge said it will go on the ballot, that was a victory. And then, when we got the vote in 2011, the people in Michigan, they...they took it down. They brought that down, that emergency manager that was impacting us as Black people way more than--but they said no! This is not, no! Because they had thousands of--we got over 1,000 miles of shoreline in Michigan, lake, all up and down Michigan. And they looked at Benton Harbor, and they seen that the emergency manager had went in there and stole their park on Lake Michigan, and you got all these little bedroom communities and stuff sprinkled up along the lake and up and down. And the people said, oh, no. Unh-unh. And so, they voted it down.

So, that was a--but as far as the water, I don't... I can't think of anything like that right off of hand, other than being inspired that we broke through the media blackout and finally we being heard. And also, maybe something kind of close to that is watching the hearings in Washington, D.C. was inspiring even though much didn't come out of it, but it was just the way Elijah Cumming--Cummings went after Darnell Earley, that was just precious. [laughs] And went after--he went after Governor [Rick] Snyder too, you know. So, that was. And so, I think I wrote an article or something about it and saying that I was watching TV and watching some of those representatives tear off into Governor Snyder and tear off into Darnell Earley, and I'm saying, "Ooh! Get 'em! Tear 'em up!," and all that. And I say, "Oh, time to go get my water. Get up and go get me some water." [snorts] You know, like, okay, that was a short-lived... [laughs]

[1:36:08]

**MB:** Can you talk about, like, a memorable loss or a short-coming or missed opportunity?

**CM:** I can't think of anything specific right now. I'll think of something soon as y'all leave, but... [all laugh]

**MB:** Do you have any lessons that you... So, given, like, all of your experience, ...

**CM:** Mmhm.

**MB:** ...any lessons that you'd offer to young organizers, just in general or those who might be trying to get more involved around organizing around water?

**CM:** Well, I think one of the things I'm proud of of our organizing is that we actually--and we didn't at first, but--we eventually came up with some demands. I mean, at a, you know...at a...at first, you're--and organizers is probably more forward-thinking than...than...than what I'm talking about, but I'm talking about the people being so frustrated, and they were talking about their...their...their aches and pains and their...their, you know, and having to go out and get water and sit in long lines and, you know... And you know, you go to the doctor, you, eczema and all of these things that were going on is just, you know. But at a certain point in time, you had to say, "Okay, what do you want to fix this?" And that's...that is a very useful, and it's a...a stabilizing tool in an organizing toolkit. This is what we going for. And, it kind of anchors you. And you still have all those problems, but now you're focused on what you're...you're going for this, and you're not gonna back down till you get this, and that's how come I say it's kind of hard to say what justice looks like because those is just down payments on justice. But there... But, this is what we got to have in order to move forward, concretely.

[1:38:40]

**MB:** So, I want to switch it back to kind of like the theme of narratives and, like, the power that narratives have to kind of shape our realities.

**CM:** Mmhm.

**MB:** And so, when people--like, given, like, when the national, like, media blackout was broken...

**CM:** Mmhm.

**MB:** ...and years have passed since then, but what do you think is most important for people to remember about Flint?

**CM:** Well, the most important thing to remember about Flint is...is--and it was...and...and it's the part that was least-told and still is. I mean, everybody know we was poisoned, da da da da da. But, most people don't know about the emergency manager system. That's...that's sort of like the untold story of the disaster here is the takeover of our city and the dismantling of democracy in this city. And that was the...that was the impetus for it. And so, that's the untold story that first they took our democracy, and then they tried to steal our water rights--not just water, water rights--and the emergency manager law was the tool, weapon du jour because privatization of water is a...is...is going on all over this country. But, the emergency manager law was the arsenal in the...in the enemy...you know, that was their weapon of choice, and it was very, very heinous and...and everything else. But, that's how we got poisoned. That's the back story that's very seldom told to the outside world, you know. Mmhmm.

[1:41:01]

**MB:** [clears throat] And to close, what is your vision... Like, when you're organizing, what's your vision? What is...what is the version of Flint that you're organizing for? Like, what would a Flint that, like, represents or operating in a way that represents our morality, like what does that look like for you?

**CM:** Well, what it looks like, for one thing, is to restore all of the things that's been stolen from us through the...through the emergency manager system. I mean, the things that the people in this city have built and maintained all these years that was taken from us even before the water. The parks, the garbage trucks, the...you...you outsource our workers. You even handed them off to a private company. So, to...to undo all the privatization and the outsourcing that has gone on so that we can restore ownership of what we built and maintained all these years would be a start.