

**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

**Aliya Moore**

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER AND ORIANA YILMA

May 17, 2019

Detroit, MI

## Narrator

Aliya Moore, born and raised in Detroit, Michigan, became involved in educational activism during the fight over the closure of her daughter's elementary school in 2013. Today, she is an organizer with Keep the Vote/No Takeover and remains involved with her children's schools. She is also the president of the PTA at Paul Robeson-Malcolm X Academy.

## 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

Aliya Moore discusses her involvement in public education activism in Detroit. She begins by talking about her childhood neighborhood in northwest Detroit in the 1980s and 1990s and how the neighborhoods have declined due to the foreclosure crisis despite the gentrification of downtown. A major topic is the closure of Oakman Elementary School. She discusses how she became involved in activism during the fight to save it, how schools activist Helen Moore became a mentor to her, going to Lansing [Michigan] and the Detroit city council to fight the closure, what it was like to be featured in Curt Guyette's article on school takeovers, backlash that she and others have faced, and how to empower parents to see themselves as stakeholders in their schools. She also talks about lessons that she learned through the Oakman fight and how few parents stayed active after the closure fight. She also speaks to broader issues such as how emergency management around the country has impacted public education and why the public education fight is tied to the water shutoff, foreclosure, and other crises. Other topics include Helen Moore's organization Keep the Vote/No Takeover, a Count Day protest for arts education in schools, opt-out protests for standardized tests, the Detroit Independent Freedom Schools movement, the teacher sickouts, lawsuits against uncertified teachers and the right to literacy, and how she thinks Detroit public schools should change.

### Keywords

2016 Detroit teachers' strike; Detroit Federation of Teachers; Detroit Independent Freedom Schools; Detroit, Michigan;; Education; Emergency management; Foreclosure crisis; Gentrification; Helen Moore; Keep the Vote/No Takeover; Oakman Elementary School; Paul Robeson-Malcolm X Academy; Special education; Teach for America; Tom Pedroni; Water shutoffs

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Transcript of interview conducted May 17, 2019 with:

Aliya Moore [AM]

Detroit, MI

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

**AM:** My name is Aliya Moore. I'm from Detroit [Michigan], and I'm affiliated with Keep the Vote/No Takeover, Journey for Justice [Alliance], Detroit LIFE Coalition, and I'm just an active parent at my daughters' school.

**OY:** Could you describe your neighborhood and the city growing up?

**AM:** I grew up on the northwest side, pretty intact neighborhood, rare--not hardly any--vacant homes. I was born in 1980, and my mom was at that house about 20 years prior to me being born because that was her mother's house. And then, we left there roughly around 2008, 2009 because the neighborhood had just went down so bad. They were breaking in constantly while she was at work, and so she just moved. But overall, it was a pretty good neighborhood. Everyone knew everybody. I remember my neighbor had told on me. I was on the corner with my little boyfriend getting off the bus, and my mom--before I got home, my mom knew. So, I mean, that's how close the neighborhood was. Even back then, it was a little break-ins, but everybody looked out for everybody, you know. Somebody had broke into our house a couple of years--maybe like I was about 10 or 11--and the neighbor hollered at 'em, and they dropped the TV, you know, and...and ran. So, it was just like we all looked out for one another pretty much, but as the years went on, you just saw the decline in the neighborhood.

**OY:** Could you elaborate a little bit about that decline? Like, how has the city changed since then?

**AM:** Oooh... I think the fore--when the foreclosure hit, that kind of just started to de...make, you know, deterior...de...what's the word, deteriorate the neighbor--the neighborhood, and then you saw people moving. You know, accidents happen, fires and things like that, but it was no rebuilding. People just moved, and then once the school closed that was around me, other people moved too. And then, even liquor stores--I mean, like, you don't need a whole bunch of those--but even when those started moving, then people started moving too.

[0:02:21]

**OY:** So, what does racism look like in Detroit today?

**AM:** Oooh... You...I often hear lately the tale of two Detroits. It's like the re-development and the establishment of downtown, and then you go in the neighborhoods and it's like a war zone. Like, you know, bombs would literally drop because it's like you get scrappers come in. They take things, and then it just...it just breaks everything down, but even when I go downtown now, it's just a different feel, you know? I really don't feel comfortable at times. I really don't because it's like when you went down before... It's more diverse, which is a good thing, but then it's kind of shifting and you see it, you know. More Caucasians, more other races, and it's almost like some of them even look at me. Maybe it's just me, but it's just a feel like what are you doing down here? Or, you know... And it's like, I live here. And it's like--even Belle Isle. I haven't been on Belle Isle since the state owned it. I mean, I went for a reunion just to go, but otherwise, just the freedom to be able to go, I don't...I don't feel that anymore.

And so, change is good. Redevelopment is good, but keeping the people out or giving them a feel of not being included, people that have been here all their lives, and we have found alternative places to set up picnics and parties in the inner part of our neighborhoods versus enjoying what we pay for with our tax dollars.

So, it...it...it's...it's...it's different, and then like I'm hearing a lot of my friends, they're getting Section Eight housing and it's pushed out more so in the suburbs. And so, it's like, they're telling me like, "Girl, come out here," you know, and I'm like, I don't...that's not what I want to do. I was born and raised here. I enjoy traveling, but this is home, and this is where I intend to stay.

[0:04:30]

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

**AM:** Miss Moore, Miss Helen Moore, Mother Queen Helen Moore. I met her in 2013. My daughters' school was Oakman [Elementary] Orthopedic [School], and it was a pre-K through fifth grade school and it specialized in special needs students but it also merged general ed students. And so, both of my daughters were spec--I'm sorry, were general ed students, and at the time of the closure, we had emergency management. This was a Detroit Public School. Emergency manager was Roy Roberts, at the time, and he came in the school, through the side entrance with an entourage, and give-or-take was about eight parents at the meeting because we didn't know the severity of the meeting, and he just came and told us he was closing our school. We needed 900,000 dollars in repair. He didn't have a breakdown of that. He said our enrollment had decreased by 50 percent, which in fact it had went up, you know, and we really didn't have any empty classrooms in the building.

And so, he let us ask a few questions. One of my questions was: where's your breakdown? You know, you got this PowerPoint up here, and you're just saying 900,000 and... "I had private contractors come in here. Next question!" And I'm like, well, wait a minute. And so, we had another parent ask a couple of other questions, and he got tired and he stormed out the room. And so, the very next day was the school board meeting, which I had never attended because I was in a good place, you know, no complaints. I had no reason to go. But we were there, maybe about 30 parents and kids were there, and that's when I met Miss Moore. And we gave our spiel at public comment, and she came up to us after and she said, "You guys can't be talking about Oakman. You know, my granddaughter went

to Oakman because she had special needs as well.” And she said, “I’m gonna...I’m gonna stay with you guys.” And she said, “I’m gonna help fight to try to keep it open.”

And that’s when we just went into planning mode on, you know, strategies of how to get the word out there to keep it open, and that was in 2013, and she has been consistent with whatever she told me she was gonna do, she did it. And it’s just me looking up her history of fighting for 45 years for public education, and it’s like people have tried to drag her name through the mud or just make up things, but her work shows consistently what she’s here for, you know. She can’t be bought out. She’ll sit at the table with the enemy and still hold her integrity, and it’s like, wow, you know. A lot of people came and went, you know. “We’re gonna help you. We’re gonna help save the school.” And you know, they came to a couple of marches and protests, and then they were gone, but she told me that. And so, even now, to this day, if I have a question, if I have a not so sure about somebody, I call her, and she’s always there. And she has stayed humble and just, you know, for her status, she could be like, you know, “Who are you?” you know, or have a bodyguard, that type of thing, but she’s just as meek and humble. And so, I look up to her. In all honesty, it’s maybe a couple of others, but she just stands out as...as Queen Mother. [laughs]

[0:07:57]

**OY:** So, could you describe a little bit more about how, like, what that experience was like for you for that situation at Oakman to be one of your first...first times being active in that type of struggle?

**AM:** Well, like I said, my daughter was there. It was K through--pre-K through five, so she was in the fifth grade, she was scheduled to graduate, and I had all intentions on sending my little one there as well because it was a learning experience there. When...when you hear special needs, you may think of separation for [air quotes] “safety reasons,” but everyone...it was... You know, everyone was together. Lunchroom, auditorium, garden, it was nowhere in that building a child in a wheelchair couldn’t go. They played basketball. I mean, everything was together. And so, I was a volunteer there. I was quiet, you know. I

did my little volunteer thing. And then, like I said, when Roy Roberts came in, and I knew what he was saying was lies, and then I got on the website, and I got on Detroit Public Schools website, and it proved our enrollment was up. I talked to the engineer. Our building--no leaks, you know, no furnace, no big issues. And we...we were just like stunned and so instead of... Some parents at that meeting, they left. They just walked out because they're like, "Okay, it's a done deal," but it angered me and it made me so mad because I was in that building five days a week and I knew what was going on in there. And teachers were like, "Oh well, it's over." Even the principal, you know.

And I kinda should of known, the day before Roy Roberts came, the principal called me into the office and she said, "You know, it's not looking good for us." And I'm like, you know, what do you mean? This is a special needs school. If anything, this school should be the last thing to be slated, you know, the last thing to be touched. But prior to Oakman closing, you know, us being just in our own little world, they had closed the year before the [Detroit] Day School for the Deaf and sent those children up to Flint [Michigan]. And you know, we didn't get it, you know, because we were good, but once that happened, it was like, well, wait a minute. Like, this...that really showed me what money does. Even for the people that was around us, even the people that were at DPS [Detroit Public Schools] Central Office, they knew it was not right, and they still let it go, you know.

They still tried to pacify us parents and say that the two schools that they were gonna send the children to were handicap accessible. We get to both schools. They're not handicap accessible. They don't have half the things Oakman had, you know. Oakman had a therapist, you know. They had in-house nurses. They had a whole wing just for our special needs babies, therapy. You know, it was like a one-stop shop. And then it's like, to go to a school that has two floors, no elevator. It's like, you're not even thinking about the babies. You're just thinking about whatever. And I say, when I say 'they,' I'm talking about the former governor Rick Snyder, and I called the emergency managers his flunkies because that's simply what they were, and the fact that they look like me, it made it even worse. The fact that the people in Central Office look like me, and they're still doing this to our babies because quote unquote, you know, they gotta keep their jobs. You know, they gotta keep their well-bottomed shoes. They gotta keep their kids with tuition. And so, they're just telling us to adapt to it, and it just made me angry.



So, it was like he came in, I think, April of 2013. So you got May, June, July, August, September, I ate, breathed, slept Oakman. It was just like any opportunity I could go to, speak about it, talk about it, put it wherever. That was just my mission, and I mean over time, by maybe September, October of 2013, people were like, "Just let it go. You know, the school's closed. We're moving on." But I'm like, I can't do that. I can't [clap] do [clap] that. And it's like, well, people like--we even filed a complaint with the U.S. [United States] Department of Education, and they cited that DPS did not make those buildings, you know, suitable for the kids. But at that point, it's like what? What...what, okay, that's a piece of paper, but what changes are gonna happen? And so, a group of us around that time, we called the news, of course, and they come out and we were just showing how these buildings were not equipped for these kids still. You know, they were still being isolated in the lunchroom, for a simple performance, to get on stage. They could do that at Oakman through the back door ramp. But at these new schools, I go to a Christmas program, we got a baby with a wheelchair on the sta--on the floor, you know, on the regular level, and the other kids are up here. How does that make him feel? But nobody's thinking about that. And so, with that news, the positive thing came that they did do some repairs.

[0:13:05]

But, I mean, the discrimination still went on and on, you know. Something as simple as a field trip, you know. You...you can't get, or they don't have accessibility, then you just can't go. And so, you know, fast forward to 2019, you know, some of those children instead of going to both schools that were slated, some of 'em stayed home, some of 'em became homeschooled. And...and it's like, if you're already dealing with special needs, you know, not to say that the parents don't have the capability to teach them at home, but why should I have to do that when you came in and closed something that shouldn't have been closed?

And so, from 2013 up until now, I just been on fire, you know. I just...I get my strength from Miss Moore because I see she's 84. I mean, I'm sorry, 82, and she's still moving. I mean, I was blessed to go to New Orleans [Louisiana] with her for a conference, I think two years ago. I had to keep up with her, literally, like [snaps fingers], she on it, from physically to mentally, and I look at it and it's like days

where I don't think I'm making any noise or it's like what's the point or when I hear those voices saying just let it go, it's like I...I look at her, and I look at others, and I say, I won't complain, I got to just keep going.

And so, fast forward now, Oakman has been closed since 2013. We did two reunions in the summer across the street from the school. We did it in 2014, and we did it in 2015. No, no, no...no, no, no--this'll, this will be the third one coming up. And I really wasn't gonna plan a third one because the momentum had kinda died down. Kids are growing up, you know. I used my daughter--she's 17 now--but I used her to kind of use Instagram to kind of bring 'em in from last year, and it was just...it...we had...we had 'em, but it wasn't a lot. And so I'm like, well, maybe people are getting tired. And I...I wasn't gonna plan it, and Miss [Helen] Moore told me, she said, "Do it." She said, "This isn't...you gotta do it." You know, because at a time where Betsy DeVos is...is cutting funding for special needs and then, even our superintendent of Detroit Public Schools, Nikolai Vitti, I appreciate him, and I appreciate the things that he's doing, but when I emailed him about Oakman, he didn't really get the importance of it. He put it on the Michigan Department of Education saying that, well, it's obvious or it was noted that they don't want this type of school. They don't want kids, you know, in, you know, separate. They want 'em pushed out into the mainstream.

And I'm like, if...if you really looked at the...the evidence and everything that I showed you, it was a that type of school. It wasn't just for special needs. We had a population of roughly around 315 students and about 60 percent of those were special needs and the rest were general ed. I...I was there. Absolutely hardly no bullying was involved. If it was, it was a special needs child on a special needs child, or gen--you know, it wasn't like that. They looked out for one another, and that was a teaching thing because even as adults, some of us don't even know. You see somebody in a wheelchair, you see somebody with crutches, you're like, oh gosh, you know, I got to get away, or I don't know how to approach them, or, you know, you're just limiting them. But, versus, you know, those kids were awesome. And it's like, even seeing them throughout the reunions and seeing them growing up, but they just...they just had so much confidence and that was built there. So I was trying to tell Vitti, like, you know, the district has J.L. White [Jerry L. White Center High School], which is a high school. They have [Charles R.] Drew [Transition Center], which is a transitioning into adulthood, but you don't have anything on the elementary level to...to get that confidence, you know. For a

child--I saw a child. He had one leg, you know, and he came to school and kinda shy, withdrawn. Within that next week of him being there, he running down the halls, you know. It's just, like, you saw life.

And it's like, to close that, it just...it just really impact my whole life and started me into this activism because like I'm telling you, before that, I was quiet, you know. I would volunteer, whatever you need me to do, don't ask me to talk 'cause I'm not saying too much, but I'll do what you need me to do. And it just like I haven't been able to shut up. And then, now that my daughter--I have a daughter at Cass Tech[nical High School] and then I have a daughter at Paul Robeson [Robeson-Malcolm X Academy] and I spend most of my time at Paul Robeson-Malcolm X. And I'm the president of the PTA there, and it's still the same thing, you know. And it's like, people say, "Just go to a charter," you know, or, "Cross Eight Mile," and you know, "Your kids deserve better." But it's like, I was educated in Detroit Public Schools. I went to school in southwest Detroit. It was a melting pot, any cul--every nationality that you can think of was over there in Southwest. And excellent experience, you know, music class, art class, you know, all of that was free. And it's like, why should I have to move my kids out to have them get what I got?

[0:18:21]

**PB:** So with all...I mean you're painting this picture of Oakman being such an important and successful and like healthy school...

**AM:** Mmhmm.

**PB:** ...but at the time that Roy Roberts comes in. So, what...you mentioned, like, what his justifications were, like with the building...

**AM:** Mmhmm.

**PB:** ...and all this nonsense. Why do you think they wanted to close Oakman?

**AM:** Because it was working. If that makes sense to you, because at the same time we were slated, Davis Aerospace [Technical High School] was slated, teaching babies how to fly planes. I mean, why would you dismantle that or mess that up? You...you close that, send 'em to a culinary school, and then bus them back for their practice on flight. What sense does that make? And...and I really believe it just was an attack on things that were working. It sounds crazy, but if you think about it, it's like we were one of the last ones to be closed in that major closing thing. And well, we saw on the news, okay, 15 other schools are getting closed. We like, "Well, it must have been justified," in our minds. But, some of those probably were working schools. And it just...it was just the dismantling of a system that, to me, was working, but the illusion in what was put out there is that DPS [Detroit Public Schools] teachers can't teach, DPS students can't learn, DPS students tear up their buildings, destroy their communities, you know. And so, we have to come in as a state and fix you and make you better and...and help you and...and assure you that we're doing the right thing for you. And during all of this, I have never been so much assured in my life. Everyone's telling me with a smile, I assure you we're doing the right thing by these kids. And I knew it was...it was messed up.

You know, the principal, I...I admired her, I respected her for her bringing just the culture of the school, and she had great teachers that were very talented. And during all the closure, me and her, I walked through the hallway with her, and I said, "Are the--are those schools really ready for our babies? Since they're gonna close our school and send them somewhere else, are these schools ready?" And she looked at me, right in my face, and she said, [shakes head and puts finger to lips] like, "I know it ain't, but I ain't gonna say nothing." And so that even made me more angry, like that just let me know, you know. You look like me, and you know what's gonna happen with our babies, but you gotta keep your lifestyle, you gotta keep your Jag[uar], and you gotta keep... And true enough, she was on her way out. She had maybe two years to retire. And so my thing was: why not go out with a bang? You know, you were...you...keep your name. Keep your reputation. But, I'd rather just float away. And, by her being, you know, compliant, they moved her to a same, K through five little neighborhood school, and she finished out her career, and I saw her at a reunion dinner and, you know, she just commended me for all my hard work and she just wished that things would be different and better.

And it just took God in me not to really go off on her [laughs], you know what I'm saying? But, I was just like, okay. Bless you, you know. Good retirement.

And it's like, even now, you know, I'm planning a reunion. It's gonna be July...in July, and I just put that out there last week because like I said, I wasn't gonna do it, but... It just...it still bothers me, you know, after all these years. And people always say, you know, "Move on," or, "You didn't have a special needs kid, why do you care so much?" And it's like, why...why don't you care so much? I mean, even if... God has put me in a position where I'm self-employed, so I can go to meetings, I can...I can stretch my schedule around, but for mothers and fathers that work, you know, sending an email, or being consistent with a phone call, or, you know, just keeping people accountable, that...that's the hard part in this work, keeping people accountable and not listening to all that negativity, you know, of...of...of stopping or you're not really making any change, you're just in your little bubble want to be heard or you want to be seen on TV. And it's like, that's not it. I'm trying to get the word out, you know what I'm saying? But it's...it just...I don't know.

[0:23:04]

**PB:** I think that those are really important topics that I think we should talk more about.

**AM:** Okay.

**PB:** Like, just like, that day-to-day struggle of keeping people engaged, keeping people organized and like empowered in the struggle. Can, like, can you tell us more about, like, those few months in 2013...

**AM:** Mmhmm.

**PB:** ...like, where you said, like, March, April, May, like so forth. Like, what was day-to-day life like? What was that organizing process like? Like, put us, like, over your shoulder, like we're there with you.

**AM:** Okay, the very next day after Roy Roberts left, we had found out that it was a school board meeting, so instantly typed up a flyer, you know, let's go, you know, passed it out. And then, once I saw that people were coming, you know, I see that they still think it's hope because when people lose hope, that makes it really bad, you know. Like I said, we had a population of 320--315, so the conditions that Roy Roberts did was that, okay, we're gonna close your school. We're gonna either make you walk two point five miles to the next school, if you don't have reason to ride the bus, or we're gonna make you walk one point five miles to the other school, whether you have siblings or not. Let's just say, I'm in a wheelchair, I'm riding a bus, my siblings can't ride because they're not authorized to ride. So we said, you know, wait a minute. Let's...let's protest this. Let's show, through a march, what these babies'll have to go through for those two point five miles. The abandoned buildings, the major cross streets, the...you know, dogs, just anything, and that's when we strategized our first march.

So, I did have a... I was in a parent group, and it was about four of us. And you know, we were very close--we're still close--and they helped. You know, if I made the flyers, they passed them out. We would meet people at their cars, you know. We put signs in front of the building--and of course, our wonderful principal, "Can you take the signs down?" I said, "Hell no." But at first I did, being compliant, not really taking my full power as a stakeholder. I'm...I'm...I'm... 'cause I'm compassionate for her, I took 'em down. And then, I thought about it. I'm like, no. We trying to save it. I don't care what your administrators are telling you to do, I bring money to this school every day, and I'm trying to save it. We're trying to save it.

And so our first march, I did a lot of emailing. I mean, every day. Emailing people, attaching the flyers. The local newspapers, we paid--'cause we had a fund for our parent group--we paid to get ads in the paper. Call Roy Roberts, you know. Some people were like, "You should go to his house." And we were like, "Ehhh, we need bail money, you know, just in case." But they wanted to do that. But when we did the first march, we had over...maybe 200 people with us, give-or-take, and we had

police with us. And we were able to go up two main streets, just to show the direction of how dangerous and, you know, obstacles that were in the kids' way, and we were successful. After that, the district said, "Hey, we're gonna bus everybody." And it was like, okay, you're still gonna close us, but at least it's some gain, it's some kind of momentum.

But that didn't stop us. We did another protest at the other school, to still show the danger because, like I said, we had a small population. You're looking at 315 kids. The other school that they wanted us to send 'em to was Noble [Elementary School]. Noble had a population then of about 700. And then, Henderson [Academy], which was supposedly the special needs sch--had, you know, accommodations, they were looking almost 900 kids at the time of the closure. So, you're...you're putting our babies in a jungle, you know, in just a big arena that they're not used to. And so we tried to videotape, like, dismissal for both schools, to see how hectic it was, and even for the parapros to get the kids on the bus that...that were currently there, just to show, you know, what...what we're trying to fight to keep secure.

[0:27:09]

And so every day, I'm emailing, calling, sending letters, just...just, I ate...and even down to the reading program. Oakman had a program called Success for All, which would allow a first grader, if she's reading on that level, to go in a third grade class for an hour, and...and it...it boosts reading up very...very much so, and Roy Roberts promised the program was gonna be at both schools, trying to ease our minds. I called the company Success for All. "We have no recollection of both of those schools signing up." So, there you go. I bring that to their face, [snaps] "Oh, we got it now." It's just like, you trying to just pacify us until somebody takes the time to do the homework, present you with your false, and then you come and say, okay, it's here. And just...we called--what is that?--OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration]. We called the people that keep the compliance for special needs. We called everybody just trying to...to justify and try to make it fit where the school shouldn't be closed.

But, I mean, unfortunately, it was closed. And once Roy Roberts left, then Jack Martin comes, the other flunkie emergency manager. And our last fight was city council, but before that, an alumni. He went to Oakman in the [19]40s, and he...his name was William Still. He was in his nineties when he contacted us 'cause he found out it was closing and he was currently living in California. He said, "What can I do?" He called the school. I called him back and he said, "You know, I'm not a rich man. I have maybe like 50,000, you know, that I'm trying to, you know, donate." He said, "But, I don't want to give it to Detroit Public Schools Foundation because I don't know where it's gonna go." And I said, "Well sadly, Mr. Still, they're saying we need 900,000 dollars in repair." And he said, "Well," he said, "Can you send me some pictures?" And I took the time and sent shots to him, and we connected after that, and he said, "It looks the same." He said, "What are you guys gonna do?" I said, "Well, we are planning to go to the State Board of Education in Lansing." He said, "I'll get you a bus." So, he sent the money for a bus. We got the bus, and the tour bus, the...the owner's sister went to Oakman. So, it was like, are you serious?

And so, we went up, maybe about 50 parents and kids. We went up to Lansing. Miss [Helen] Moore went with us, and we brought facts because in this fight, emotion, they don't care about emotion. You can holler, scream, cry. They like, that's not factual. Get that out of my face. We went with facts, we went with emotion, we went with alumni. We went why...engineer went with us. Everybody testified. The State of Michigan sent the district a letter just saying they needed to increase transparency with us. Not questioning the closure. And so, we were like, "Oh, okay." And so, our last pitch was city council. And at that time, Jack Martin was in. This man sits up in city council and says, "I see why you guys were fighting for that building. It's a beautiful building. It should have been downtown." And we like, "What the hell?"

But by then, scrappers had came in. 'Cause what the district did is once it closed, they left the water on and cut the power off because one of their rationales was that we had major floor issues. That was one of their rationales on top of the build...the roof or whatever, which was not true. But once you leave the water on, people start stealing pipes, what happens? The basement flooded, we got major ripples in the wood, and that justifies it. So he sits in city council and says, "But sadly, the building's almost nine million dollars in repair." Like what? [laughs] And so, we...it just was like... And even a professor, his name is Thomas Pedroni,



excellent professor, came with all the facts, you know, when we went to Lansing. And it's just like it didn't matter, and city council, at the time the President was Miss Saunteel Jenkins, you know, she--because we were hollering in the crowd--she's like, "Well, we're not gonna do this. If you can't be still and, you know, settle, we'll just dismiss this whole, you know, this whole conversation." But prior, her and Jack Martin went in a closed room prior to the meeting starting. So it's like, you know, and it just... After that, then, like I said, it was just follow-ups and just trying to keep accountable, so.

[0:32:02]

**PB:** So, we heard a little bit...you told us about, like who your adversaries were in this.

**AM:** Mmhmm.

**PB:** Who were some of your allies, aside from Helen Moore and Tom Pedroni?

**AM:** Well, the very first march, we connected with BAMN, and BAMN is By Any Means Necessary, which literally they...they hold true to their name, you know, because we had a lot of young members of BAMN wanting to come out, and that's what Miss Moore also told me. She said, "When you start organizing, you see who wants to just be in the front and show your face, put your name out there because that will carry you to somewhere else, versus really being in the struggle for you." And I saw that, you know. I appreciated them for their numbers because they did bring a lot of people with them and they did bring light to the issue, but they didn't want to listen, you know. If...if you have somebody organizing this, and we want the police to work with us, we don't want them to start arresting us because we're not conducting ourselves. We're trying to prove a point. And...but they were a good ally with us at the time, but then they...they moved away.

A couple of other people, just individuals that were really willing to step in the gap, go to jail. We had people that were willing to wear, like, mascot costumes and

go to Roy Roberts' house and they helped us organize. It was a couple of churches that let us use their building for meetings, people we did fundraisers with, local people from Eastern Market. They sent letters of support to Roy Roberts, you know. We did have a...a couple of churches and a couple of individuals that actually, you know, took the time out to write support letters and send it.

But big wigs, you know, people that you think would be interested in this story, were like, they don't care about that. And that was another thing. I'm like, you an official. You sit. Somebody voted you in. You getting paid really good. We mention this story to you. We want your help. They want to charge us for coming to help. Like, who do that? They...they saw that we had a budget. Well, I--you...you give me 800, I'll try to get you on the news, I'll try to get you in the paper. The Michigan Citizen, a lady named Teresa Kelly, excellent. She came out every time we called her. The...the other two newspapers, ehh [shakes hand to indicate a medium level of support]. They were hesitant, and they always put their spin on the story, in the story. But Metro Times, they stayed true to us. The Michigan Citizen is no longer in publication, but Teresa Kelly stood with us. Even the Michigan Chronicle, they wanted to charge us to put an ad in the paper, and I'm like, really? But then I look through the paper, and I said, oh, it's bought, never mind. So it's like, you just... The Monitor, we put an article in the Monitor, write Rick Snyder, write Roy Roberts, you know. We...we tried to keep that in there for a couple of months.

So I mean, we had good allies, but like Miss Moore said, it's like, when it's moving and I guess either you don't see progress or you get what you want out of it, you disappear. And it's like, we did three protests, went to Lansing, and then we went to city council. And by the end, really, the one that was standing with us was Miss Moore. And we had a c--you know, a couple of other people that were very knowledgeable in their field to be able to support our reasoning for keeping it open. But ultimately, you know, people just...they did, they disappeared.

[0:35:40]

**PB:** What was that like having--I'm thinking about the coverage in the Metro Times, like you're featured in that great story that Curt Guyette...

**AM:** Yes!

**PB:** What was that like, like being the feature of this, such an important article about, like, more broadly, just the state of public education in this newspaper that's all over the city?

**AM:** I had no idea I was gonna be on the cover. I didn't. Because he came, and I was just excited of the fact of who he was, what he stood for, and the fact that he was coming to interview me and my kids, and he was with us the whole day, you know, interviewed us, walked around the school and everything. And when I saw the paper come out, I'm like, are you serious? Me? [laughs] On the cover of something? But I'm like, whatever it takes, you know, it's like... 'Cause you get that, people, "Oh, you're just want to be seen." And it's like, no, you don't, but somebody has to tell the story. We can talk about it in the lunchroom or at the grocery store, but if no one knows, the perception of people watching the news is justified. "Oh, it deserved to be closed." But it didn't, and that was the fact for other schools. But it's like, who is willing to stand in that gap and tell the story because it's like, once you're out there, people start looking you up, good or bad, you know.

And it's like, what do you do? Do you sacrifice, oh, let me be quiet 'cause I got some, you know, creditors on me and I got people that...you know? Or do I just stand for truth? And I had to make that decision, and I had parents whispering in my ear, you know, "Be careful. Thank you for fighting for us, but be careful." And it's like, I really started to see it. This stuff is real. Like, if you're messing with people's money, if you're having other people awake or waking up by what you're saying to question the powers-that-be, that's an issue because the more and more people are woke, then they want to see change or we're ready to do something about what we don't like, versus just me being by myself.

And so Miss Moore, once again, she was telling me, you know, in this 40 year fight, you know, her house almost got blown up, you know. People tried to sabotage her lines in her house, in her car. You know, it's just certain things that

you have to deal with when you choose to speak up for what's right. And it's like, even now... So, I mean, I try to stay in my personal life low-key, but it's like when you out there, people will try to dig up anything they can find to try to tear your credi--credibility down so no one will listen to you. And that has happened time and time again with people that live in this city that are willing to fight for this city, and then you look up, they're in a scandal. Not saying that the scandal is right, but it's just, it's a tactic to try to bring truth down and to say, "Oh, don't listen to him. He's caught up in this, that, and this." But not thinking about what he put out there that was really true, he or she. So, it...it's a choice, but once I saw them doing that--when I say 'they,' Rick Snyder and all the other flunkies doing that to kids and the type of kids that they were. It's like, if those kids could save that school, that school would still be open. That's why I filmed them interacting in the school and I used that to give to whoever wanted to see it, but I knew that it needed to be told, even the...the...the...looking at the...the building, having a person come in, a private contractor, and look and document that was nothing wrong with that building. I knew that doing those things would be beneficial in the end because whoever wanted to see it would change that narrative of it was supposed to be closed. But, I mean...

It ain't about the limelight, it just... And I get that with people, you know, they...they look at me and even our relationship with Miss Moore, it's like, "Oh, who you think you are?" I'm blessed that she chose me as one of her...you know, somebody that I can go up under her wing and get mentored, and that's a privilege and an honor, that's not like, "Oh, I think I'm all that." What? You think this stuff is easy? [laughs] It's not easy, and it's like I have to tell my kids that, too, because my kids go to every meeting I go to. They already know, pull your homework out. Their first question is, "Is it food? Is there gonna be food at the meeting. Okay, we good. We gonna sit in the corner, do our homework, chill, and we gonna eat, and we gonna be at this meeting." It's like my 17 year old, "Aw, another meeting." But, you know you got to go. And so even, I'm listening to my nine year old--at the time she was seven--and she's playing, you know, imaginary whatever, and she's talking about emergency management and naming names, and I'm like, this stuff is sinking in with her. And she, my 17 year old, shies away from public speaking, but I'm seeing what I do reflect on her even in her high school, being able to email a teacher and express how she feels versus saying, "Ma, come...come try to fix this for me." And I let her know, you know, I'm proud of you for standing up for yourself because as you get older, this is gonna have to be a constant for you. Sticking up for yourself, being able to document what you

say, present facts versus emotion because I've learned that emotion does not play any factor in this type of fight because that can be their rationale. "Oh, you're just too emotional." It's no facts in what you're saying. You could be bleeding, crying, right here, please God help save, and they're like, "That's not factual," and just cut you off, so.

And I'm still learning! The thing that...that Miss Moore has that I don't have yet: she is able to sit with the enemy and...and...and be...be... The...the first thing is I don't even want to sit with you. I'm not even there yet, you know. I feel like if you don't mean me any good, you...you're not respecting my calls and what I'm trying to do and you're blatant with it, I don't want to sit with you. But she knows how to do that, and she still knows how to be tactful and forceful and still hold her grounds, and I'm learning that. Even in a...in a capacity of I went to a volunteer appreciation dinner last night. And it's like that's the photo op, you know. Everybody wants to take a picture with Vitti and all these other big wigs, and it's like I'm sitting there at the table like uhhhh, okay. But you...you have to kind of do that in a way, and I'm just...I'm learning to get there. It's a...it's a process. [laughs]

[0:42:15]

**PB:** Did you...I mean aside from kind of like...the kind of, like, backbiting and like the talk that...that you're describing...

**AM:** Mmhmm.

**PB:** ...kind of like backlash, did you face any backlash, or have you, like, whether it's at Oakman or since? Like, facing backlash from, like, the powers-that-be.

**AM:** Yes. They've, of course, wanted to sit at the table with us, which they did. At Paul Robeson, for example, they came because of the placement tests. You know, eighth graders, they take a test to go to Cass [Technical High School], [Martin Luther] King [Jr. Senior High School], and Renaissance [High School]. When [Nikolai] Vitti, Dr. Vitti, got here, he wanted to mess with that application process

to a way where, in our minds, it opened up those schools more to the suburban areas got a little more clout than us. And we like, wait a minute, you know. These are our schools. If our schools are so bad, why do they want to come here? And that was our first thing, and so we went to the Fisher Building, and we caught him in the elevator, me and Miss Moore and a couple other parents, and we say, "You need to come to Paul Robeson and explain this." And he was true, came that day, and sat and talked with us.

But, another instant was a parent leader in Central Office. Her question was to me, like, you know, "Why you don't like me?" And I'm like, it's not personal. You're taking this personal. I don't like the job that you're hired to do and you're doing it in the way you're doing it, but it's not personal. And I mean, I could--well, I won't say that because my...my daughter's at Cass now and she is having some issues on attendance. And it's like, the district did hire truancy officers, which is good. We had 'em when I was in school. Dr. Vitti brought 'em back. And it's like, the population at Cass is over 2,000 plus, and it's like the truancy officer let my daughter know her situation instead of letting me know. So now, we're going to court. I just went to court last week for her truancy. And I sat with the agent, and I'm like, you know, why wasn't this brought to me? This should've--a letter was mailed home, something emailed to me. "We're trying to teach the kids responsibility." It's like, I understand that, but she's still a minor. I should have been notified first.

And so we're in court, and she act like she never had a conversation with me, but I'm like--and then, when I was in her office prior to court, she said, "Well, our system is so backed up, you know. You might not even make it to court." I got a letter. We had to go to court. So, I mean, I could kind of think--true enough, my daughter needs to go to class, every class. But is it my name that they saw and said, "Oh, let's take her to court." You know what I'm saying? You got to think about things like that because you don't know, being targeted. That's why in this fight, you gotta try to dot your i's, cross your t's. I make sure my kids are in uniform, make sure I try to get 'em there every day. Like I said, I'm active at my--Paul Robeson[-Malcolm X Academy], but it's like you gotta kinda always keep an eye out because you don't really know. You don't really know if they're gonna try to attack you or try to--Oh! One more story. [laughs]

Who was it? After Jack Martin, we had--the guy that was in Flint and he came down here and he called himself Jeremiah, coming down [Interstate] 96 to save the kids in Detroit, I saw him--Darnell Earley, yes sir! And he was at a clergy meeting, and I snuck in that clergy meeting of Detroit Public Schools and clergy, and that's what he told those ministers, that he felt like Jeremiah coming down 96 to save these children. And I'm like, are you serious? And so, once I found out that he was gonna be in charge, I got to inform parents. I got to inform people. So, we have a parent board at Paul Robeson, and I put his picture up. I said, this is who's in charge now. He gave the...the whistle for the Flint [Michigan] situation, or he was involved in that, he was one of the...the main key players, and I put that on the board. The principal's supervisor came in the building, and she told him, "Take that down." And he took it down. I walk in the building, I said, " [Jeffrey] Robinson, where is my stuff?" "Supervisor told me to take it down." I put it right back up. They come back in, "Why is this up?" I said, "Because it's the truth." What did... I...I can say what I want! I said, "You can tell him to take it down, but I put it up because I'm a stakeholder and I want to inform fer--fellow stakeholders." "But that's not necessarily true and you can't prove that." I said, "Don't you read? Aren't you aware of him being there and..and what's going on there and now he's here!" And so, it...it...they left me alone after that. But they had us at another sit-down meeting, and they were really trying to justify why we should take that down. And so it's like... [laughs] And true en--after that, she...that position dissolved, so she wasn't even in leadership anymore, but it's just the...the blatant, in-your-face, like, they just try to run you. They...they...they fail to realize that.

And that's my job as well, too, to let people know you're a stakeholder. If you got multiple kids, you're bringing, what, 15, 20 plus thousand to school every day. That's just like if you go to Wal-Mart or Target. You're gonna complain, right? You go to MacDonald's, customer service, it's the same thing, because they call us customers in this district. So where's the customer service, you know? And...and that's...that's the daily fight even now, letting people know their power.

[0:48:21]

**PB:** So is that the gen...like, I want to...I want to give a better insight into your approach, like, having those conversations with people, like to... 'cause you

mentioned that your role, one of your roles, right, is to let people know they're stakeholders, ...

**AM:** Yes.

**PB:** ...which is coming from a place of empowerment, ...

**AM:** Yes.

**PB:** ...like empowering parents and other stakeholders to be doing this. So like, you gave us that example, right? Can you, like, give us the talk, like, as if we were the parents of, like, a student in one of these schools, like, in Oakman, ...

**AM:** Okay.

**PB:** ...in Robeson? Like, what conversation are you having with us?

**AM:** Initially, your concerns and what...what's the issue because parents will come to us, or you're coming in our parent room with your complaints. You may be in tears, you may be frustrated, but after all of that, let's get it, let's get something accomplished. Letting you know what your rights are. Letting you know who to contact in Central Office. Letting you know that that supervisor has a supervisor that has a supervisor. If you want to go all the way to the top, let's do it, but just know that we run this school, you know. They're not doing us a favor by coming here and providing, you know, the services of educating our kids in a...at a district level. But, you have the power to change whatever you don't like, you know. It may not happen immediately, but if you're consistent and if you are speaking with facts, then you can definitely change it, and to let them know, like I said, if this person says no, you go over that person, but you document what this person said to you and...and keeping a paper trail is a must, you know.



I rarely deal with phone voicemails and having phone conversations. I had to learn that because in the...in the...in the beginning of the fight, I'm having phone conversations. I get off the phone, and it's like, dang, you know, I didn't take any notes. This phone conversation probably won't even reach anybody, but I saw the power in an email, and don't put a...don't--what you call it? CC somebody. Oh no, what did you do that for because the CC is like, oh, you're telling. I got that before. "You didn't have to CC Vitti." You don't tell me who I got to CC! It got done, right, because you saw your boss see it. And so, I...I tell people, or I...I suggest to people, that develop your paper trail, talk with facts and be consistent and get as many people that you know or you think that's gonna do something about it to back you up because my little email that I send with power, but I CC it to four other people that have power that can call that person out, then that's more...more movement. It's gonna...something has...something has gotta break. And so, that...that's...that would pretty much be the gist of the conversation, but the paper trail is a must. I had to learn that.

[0:51:28]

**PB:** So like, revisiting the Oakman struggle, I want to ask you about, like, lessons that you learned coming out of that about, like, whether that's organizing or the power structure in the city and the state. Like, do you think that there was anything that you or the community could have done differently, or was there anything you could have done to stop that school from closing?

**AM:** I think being less fearful and more drastic. I really think that would have saved it because as time went on and we saw that the wheels were not necessarily going in our direction, we got desperate, and it was like, do we do a sit-in? But then parents were like, you know, "I gotta go to work. I got things to do." But the people that were bagging us, they're like, "If y'all pack y'all kids in this building and don't leave or you surround it when, you know, the last day and say we're not leaving, or even going to Roy Roberts' home with that, you know, not having that fear."

And I think fear kind of like had us at a standstill because we're trying to do things the right way and be effective, but sometime you got to go that extra mile, but it

was like we don't have a bail money account, you know. We don't have people to stand in the gap if I got to go to work or you got to stay out here, but like I said, if the kids could have saved it, they would have. I believe those kids would have stayed it, you know, stayed there and locked, barred the doors, or stood at the doors or whatever, but I think that was our handicap, just being fearful and...because, I mean, we...we really tried to exhaust everything we could do, and it was like we thought we had something going up to Lansing, we thought we might have had a move going to city council, but it was just like it...it didn't happen. And so, I think fear just kind of set in.

And then, like I said, the bigwigs in this city did not take an interest to that school. It was just like, oh well. You know, one of the city council members, he even said, "They closed McFarlane [Elementary School]." And we're like, "McFarlane? What does that have to do with anything?" Like, I guess that was a personal connection with him, but it was just like not enough people with clout stood with us that could have really done something, and that kind of taught me kind of about politics, too. Like, you know, even in that game of city council. [snaps fingers] Saunteel Jenkins, she was president. Now, she's over THAW [The Heat and Warmth Fund]. You know, in this city, the...the people, they change positions all over the place, and it's like, you look up, and it's like, how did you get there? And it's like, even for the charter commission, their new lawyer, he just left the district. And it's like, you go from schools to now you're a lawyer with the charter commission? And it's like, you just... The same players, and they just float, and they change their position, but...but they still stay in that same game of just me trying to get mine, and I'mma play this position out. I'mma do what I got to do, and I'm on to the next.

Even our school board, elected school board. I didn't vote for any of those people. I don't even know where those people came from. During the fight for Oakman, I went to school board meetings consistently from 2013 up until now, saw none of those people--with the exception of LaMar Lemmons, which is not on the board anymore. That was the real one. Everybody else--where do you think them people came from? They got all this money to put stuff in your mailbox. You see 'em--oh, I'mma vote for 'em just because they got money enough to keep their...their face in your...in your mailbox. And so, you just... But it's like, even those people. No interest in the...in the school system, and now you care all of a sudden. Our...our president [Iris Taylor] came from the DMC [Detroit Medical Center]. Who does she

work with? Mike Duggan at the DMC. But no, you know, it's just...it's thick, and it's like, learning the school thing and then dipping into the politics, I'm like, man, this is some tricky stuff. But the players, they...they stay the same and...and they're...they're able to continue to do their dirt with the money that protects them. They got good lawyers. They got good publicists. You know, they got all of this stuff to protect them, and they're doing crooked deeds.

[0:56:00]

**PB:** So speaking of the school board, during the Oakman struggle, it was...it was the school board in exile, right?

**AM:** Yes, yes.

**PB:** So what was their role in all of this?

**AM:** They were very helpful. That whole board, with the exception of one flunky, but they were very helpful. They marched with us. They put in public statements at anytime, but they didn't have respect. But we didn't know that! We went to that school board meeting the next day after Roy Roberts came in, and we thought we had an elected school board with full power. We get there. They listen to us. Some of 'em were even close to tears, and they like, "It's nothing we can do because we don't have any power under emergency management. We feel you guys. We understand. We...what can we do? But, we don't have any power. They don't even respect us!" And true enough, when we got this new elected board, oh, we finally have a...a school board that's, you know, in charge. And it was like those people were vested, that...that board in exile. They knew the history. They knew the history of emergency management. They knew the break-down of this district. These new people? All they want to tell you to do is move forward. Let's move forward. That's the past--not recognizing the damage emergency management did to affect the future. Oh, it's over. Let's just move on. Get over it. It's a...it's a new day! [laughs] And it's like, but yes, they were very helpful, but they didn't have any power.

And so, that's why I believe LaMar Lemmons still stayed on the board, and I hope he comes back. His wife [Georgia Lemmons] is on the board. I don't really know her. I don't...I don't really know her. She ha...she hasn't been very vocal, and so we have a board full of women. Nobody's really vested. Mayberry Peterson [Angelique Peterson-Mayberry], who is the Vice President, she has a dau--a child in DPS, but that's it! And it's like, they're very passive. They're very non-original, they're just... It's no opposition. LaMar Lemmons brought that balance, you know. He questioned certain things. This board, they just go with the flow, and it's so frustrating, meeting after meeting, you go to. They do a whole lot of closed sessions.

Now, they have a number system. I've never been to a public meeting where you have to take a number to do public comment. They just started that in April. And so, I'm...I'm always one that hollers out. I'm like, so now we're at the DMV [Department of Motor Vehicles] or the...the, you know, the FIA [Family Independence Agency] office? We gotta take a number? And this last meeting, the teachers were so strong. It was standing room only. You saw white DFT [Detroit Federation of Teachers] shirts. The energy was good, packed room. And they have 45 public comments, and the President was like, "Well, as the union president, you can take your six minutes, or do you want to let everybody talk?" He said, "Absolutely. Why would I want to take the six minutes for the bulk of my union? Let everybody speak." And so you had 45 comments of speaking, and everybody had a number. But by the time you hit 30, the president, she was so tired of calling people's names to go with the number, she just started calling the numbers. And I...we screaming out, like, how effective is this? This is another way to control public comment.

And so, at the...when they first got elected, public comment was at the end of a meeting. People made such a...a fuss, and a r...you know, a ruckus, so now they put it in the middle of the meeting. But it's still, you know, I don't trust anybody on that board. I honestly don't, and I don't feel like they have...I feel like they have an agenda. Because if you do research on some of them, they already in the mayor's pocket. That's how they got their money to get on the board, but nobody wants to talk about that. They just want to move forward, see the new energy, and know that Detroit Public Schools is coming back.

[1:00:06]

**PB:** Hmm. There's so much there.

**AM:** [laughs]

**PB:** My goodness. I want to wrap up Oakman and get us closer to the present. So like, we can keep talking about the board and things like that.

**AM:** Okay.

**PB:** I'm curious, like, in, like--and this is coming back to the conversation about your role in empowering parents. Did you see--I mean, aside from yourself obviously--other parents that stayed active, stayed engaged by, like, after the Oakman struggle. So like, was Oakman like a...a springboard for other folks to get more engaged and more involved in, like, in community organizing, or...?

**AM:** I can't really honestly say yes. It did br...it did raise more awareness in parents and allowed them to be more vocal on what they wanted for their children because, you know, God blessed me, I didn't have children that have special needs, but for some of those parents, they already feel guilt because they feel like it's something that they did to cause their child, you know, to be born that way. So, some of them sometimes--and even some of them have their own learning disabilities, and so they tend to be more shy or more withdrawn from the process because, you know, they feel like they're powerless. And so, I did see some of those parents that, you know, it brought something out in them, but I can't say, you know, they just wanted to, you know, just be an advocate or just raise and make a lot of noise, but it did allow them to be more vocal about what they wanted for their kids and what they didn't want for their kids and it made them think about really and truthfully how...how this journey is gonna be now that this school is closed. And it...it caused them to do more investigation on where their kids are going and...and what their kids are gonna be faced with.

And so, even now, I still have a few parents that call me with special needs kids, and they voice their frustrations at the new schools, you know, either not being accommodating or their IEP was not looked at the right way, their Education Improvement Plan was not looked at the right way, or, you know, just call me crying some days, just frustrated, and I feel that's an honor because after all these years, they feel like I can still call Miss Moore and say, you know, I got a problem or what do you think I should do. And even that one parent that I'm speaking of, she has two special needs daughters that had surgery on their legs, and they went through the whole brace thing and the therapy thing. But in between, now they're in high school, and it was some accommodation issues in high school, and mom even has some leg issues, and she had surgery, but I...I just admire her so much because she didn't give up. She said, I'm not gonna homeschool my kids. I'm gonna fight for my kids to go where I want them to go and to have what I want them to have. So she branched out and got more resources, and she's in a good place right now. She still has her ups-and-down days. But like I said, it's a privilege for her and an honor for her to feel like she can still call me and I have some type of insight on it, something to be able to help her with.

But you know, other parents, sadly, they just went in. I don't hear from them anymore. I see their kids on social media, but I don't...I don't see them. And I don't know--some of them got homeschooled. I don't know how well that's going, but it just... Yeah, I...I can't really say a lot of activism came out of it, but at least voices became stronger with this fight.

[1:03:55]

**PB:** So, I mean, obviously the Oakman closing was the doing of the state and the...

**AM:** Yes.

**PB:** ...emergency managers. Could you speak a little bit more broadly about how state takeover is in...like, emergency managers in schools has impacted public education in the city?

**AM:** Yes. When I was... Like I said, I was fortunate to go to New Orleans with Miss Moore at a Journey for Justice [Alliance] conference. And you know, you hear people say it's happening everywhere, but to be in a big room and to see people from all over the United States, every state pretty much was represented, and it was the same story. They changed...emergency management was not necessarily that name, but it was still from their governor or the mayor had stepped in in some of their schools or, you know, just that takeover. And you listening to all of these stories, and you're like, that sounds like home. And it's like, the way they come in, they come in--and when I say 'they,' the...the...the government, I mean the governor and--they come in and they say, like I said before, "You guys need help. You guys are struggling. Let us help you. Let us...let us trim away some of your schools that...that are not being successful," and they testing 'em to death, which justifies more school closures because you're in the priority.

And that's...that's what I'm dealing with now is Paul Robeson. You know, we taking all these tests, and then those tests are not looking at the individual student, it's just the test. And they use those tests to justify closure. Now, Paul Robeson is...is a [air quotes] "priority school," which means we have three years under Wayne RESA [Regional Educational Service Agency] to get resources, resourcing our teachers to try to help our students, but we're under three years of...of, you know, oversight until we get that correct. Otherwise, you know, we're at the bottom of the list, so what happens? You get cut. And Paul Robeson is the only African-centered school left in the district because Marcus Garvey [Academy] was once, but they have stripped their African-centered give-or-take a year or two ago, so we're...we're the only one left.

And it's like, that...but it happens, it's happening all over, and it's been happening since I got out of school. I got in [19]98, from Cass [Technical High School]. And the next year, the state had came in. And so, I was not interested in school and I was happy to be out, but once I had my kids and I started looking for schools, and I'm looking around and this one is closed and that one is closed and that's how I found Oakman, but it was like I wasn't even, you know, thinking about what was

going on, but it has been happening 20 years plus. And here we are. DPS had--I don't know how many schools they actually had, but we have about 100 plus now, and [Nikolai] Vitti has opened up Burton [International Academy] now, which was once owned by charters, so we got that back. And so, that's why I try to kind of put Oakman in his ear to see that, you're opening schools, how 'bout revisiting this? But so far that conversation has not been...has not gone that far, but just to see the dismantling of public education. And people don't really believe it. Some people think public education isn't important. You know, you can do better by homeschooling your kids and that's just what's new now. I'm not prepared to do that. I feel like I shouldn't have to, you know? Or even going to a charter school--the three of us can open up a charter school! We get the funding. Test scores or whatever fail, school closes, me and you can open up another one in another name. It's a business! And so, it...it...

I still believe in public education. I still think it's needed. I mean, people say it waters you down, it just teaches you the basics, but it's all in what you want to come to your school, and that's what I tell parents. You have the power to try to implement whatever other programs that you want to come here. You do your research, you do your homework, you present it, and you be consistent, and...and it can happen.

[1:08:22]

**PB:** Could you tell us a little bit about your role in Keep the Vote/No Takeover, like how does it...how does the coalition work, who's involved, ...

**AM:** Okay.

**PB:** ...like what...what's going on with the group these days?

**AM:** Okay. Well, once I met Miss Moore, she invited us to start coming to her meetings, and they are held at the Dexter-Elmhurst Center, which is a very much needed center that they had just o--reopened up. Community did a lot of



fundraising, grant writing to try to get it open, and the neighborhood that it's in, it's very much needed because a lot of people in that area, water is cut off. I mean, a lot of people in this city, our waters are cut off. My water got cut off, you know, for 200 dollars. 200 dollars! But, I mean, you got to do what you got to do. I got it cut back on, but some people are not that fortunate. And so, that Center gives out water to the neighborhoods. And so, when I met Miss Moore, she invited us to the meetings, and I've been going ever since.

I mean, the history of Keep the Vote is so strong, you know, but people are getting older. You know, she...she could at one point, you know, snap her finger and she got a crowd of people out there. But people are getting older, and so it's like now, it's the transitioning of who's gonna keep this going, you know, and I'm there for whatever she needs me to do. I can't say I'm ready to fill that position because that's like...that's...that's big to me. That's a lot of responsibility, but the people that are still currently there, they're meeting-goers. If she needs them to go somewhere and speak out, that's what they're gonna do, and they're very boisterous. They have facts, and they hold people accountable, and...and I look at her group as that type of group. They're holding officials, whether city, school, state, accountability and not being afraid to speak up and...and that really is the bulk of that group. Some of those members are also in NAN, National Action Network, which is another powerful group. I have not yet to join that group, but they're also members in that. But it's a strong group, and like now, like I said, it's older people, so the attendance is not as great monthly, but when she makes that call, they come out, you know, walkers, wheelchairs, canes, they're there, you know.

And it was a situation last year where--I can't even think about who was there. It was someone from Lansing, and they were at Northwestern [High School], and it was a meeting, and [laughs] they were sitting at this panel, and they were changing Northwestern's name. It was something going on with that. And you know, people were crying and true enough and all of that emotional stuff. But when facts start coming along, Miss Moore she said, "Block the doors!" And the people got up, canes and walkers, and blocked them doors, scared the mess out of them people at that table. They had to call the officers in to escort them out, but that changed the whole game where they were now receptive to listening to those alumnis with their situation. I don't know the turnout, but just the initial, you know, you see a bunch of elderly people in a room, you don't think it's

intimidating, but once they blocking the doors, and you stuck in there like, “Please help me, officer.” You know, it...it makes a difference. And so, that’s the type of people that are in that group, and I do admire them because they could--they’re retired. They could be at home chilling, watching TV, you know, playing with their grandkids, and not still have that spark of fighting in them. And that’s something that I want to do until the day I die, you know, just have that spark, don’t just say, oh, I’m old, I’m tired. But, I can still do something! And that, that’s really the bulk of her organization now, and it’s just, I guess, just training new people to stand in and to keep Keep the Vote/No Takeover alive.

[1:12:31]

**PB:** So where are the young people at in this?

**AM:** Honestly? See, I have broken it down. With the Oakman fight, I think is three type of people. It may be more, but I...I figured it out to three. It’s the people that want to do something. They don’t really know what they can do to create change, but they want to do something, but they’re scared. Then, you have the people that do something, but then it falls off. It’s not necessarily consistent. And then, you have the people that just don’t. It’s not an interest to them, or they feel like oh, they gonna do what they want to do. I hear that so much. Oh, it’s already set in stone. They... What you doing, that ain’t gonna do nothing. And then, that...I give them the example of slavery. It’s like, true enough, I still feel like we have some mental slave issues, but the physical slavery is over, true enough. I say, so, was that written in stone? Was that, you know, the...the final line? So if you can accept that, and know that that’s over, why can’t you, you know, use that in everyday life today, and...I don’t know.

I mean, people have to work, you know. Like I said, I’m blessed to...to work for myself, so I make my own schedule, but you know, if you a mom, a dad, you work two jobs, you get the kids, you... That’s your fight right there, just everyday struggle versus not even thinking about it, your off time, your...your lunch break. You can still be an advocate during that. Email somebody, call somebody, you know, come to a meeting. But, it’s not an interest. For some people. For some people, it’s...it’s...it’s not an interest.

[1:14:20]

**PB:** So like, right around the ti--like, Oak...the Oakman struggle, right, is taking place at the same time that the city's coming under emergency management, right?

**AM:** In a way, yes.

**PB:** So, did you have any involvement with, like, the struggle against the emergency manager of the city and, like, the whole bankruptcy proceedings and all of that?

**AM:** We protested in front of the hotel where Kevyn Orr was on the Fourth of July--I think maybe that...I think it was 2013, I think that July, yeah. We pro--it wasn't a large crowd, but media did show up and because the...the tax payers were footing his bill for him staying in that hotel while he was here, and so we...we protested that. But, I mean, that was about it in that struggle, pretty much that was about it because that didn't...that was just a one-day thing, made a little statement, but he still was here and we still were paying for him to be here [laughs].

**PB:** So like, having been involved in the struggles with the educational sphere against emergency managers and take--state takeovers, did that give you all like a special insight into the, like, the takeover of the city in general that was coming on?

**AM:** I would hear that, and you're able to kind of put it together, but I was not really in that loop like that because it was like I'm focused on the schools--and then, I...I noticed, too: it's a meeting every day of the week. You could go to two or three meetings a day and not even touch half the things people are fighting for. You got the water fight. You got the city up under bankruptcy fight. The schools

fight. You've got foreclosure fight. I mean, I went to all of these different meetings trying to tie awareness to Oakman. So, I was at the water meeting, I was at the city meeting, I was at the foreclosure meeting, just going to different groups, listening to their fight, wanting and trying to participate in their fight and their marches, but still bringing awareness to Oakman and...and what I was trying to do. So, even that was a balance that I tried to do, but I mean it's a fight every day of the week [laughs]. It really is.

**PB:** So, you were at, I mean, all of these different meetings, like, and a lot of people kind of engage with these as though they're separate issues.

**AM:** Right.

**PB:** Right. What kind of connections did you see between all of these issues? Like, how did you...like, what was the big picture for you?

**AM:** The trickery. The trickery. And it just...connecting, like I said, the players and the fact that it was designed, or it was...and...and us pushing back, you know, trying to disrupt the...the plan, but seeing how all of this ties in, you know, because you close a school, people losing their homes, that neighborhood is gone. Like, you right by my house now. I'm...I'm still Northwest side, but you got a block that's totally empty, totally empty, and then you have an abandoned school that sits right here. No businesses are coming to see us, you know. I had a...I just went to a block club meeting last week. Gabe Leland is my city council person, and I asked him plainly, you know, "Aren't you still under investigation? I mean, I know I'm...I haven't come to the meetings as much, but I'm here. Aren't you still under investigation? What's going on with that?" He shifted it to his lawyer and said, you know, he will be vindicated, but he, you know, promising we're going to get new businesses in the area. And it's like, who's coming over here? They just opened a truck driving school around the corner from me in an old Chrysler parking lot, so we got two truck drivers schools and then a car lot that has bought all three of those old Chrysler plant building parking lots, and that's successful business to them! What do they care if we hear the honking of the horns and all that in the morning? They don't care about none of that. They're like, hey, we're bringing

something back over here, so you should be grateful because otherwise this would just be empty land.

And it's like, truthfully, all of this stuff is tied together, even with the water shutoffs, you know. People could possibly lose their kids, you know. Whether you're not getting them to school, or they're in school and they don't have water. They call that, what, abuse, but if I can't keep my water on for 200 dollars, 300 dollars, I can get my kids took. And with my mortgage, I don't pay that, my house is gone. So it just...it's all tied in together, but...and that's true! People that's organizing these things, we kind of...you kind of have to stop yourself, but you can just get focused on your fight instead of bringing it all together, and I think that's what the breakdown is with a lot of organizing. When you don't see the title on the flyer that fits what you're fighting for, you kind of just drop it, like, oh, okay. But instead, coming together, even if I stand for you with the water, you come stand with me for my march, we, it's progress, you know. But it happens, but it's kind of rare.

[1:19:56]

**PB:** That...and that notion of like getting, children getting taken for the water, like it makes...it's raising the question on my mind about like the condition of...the situation with water in the schools, right?

**AM:** Mmhmm.

**PB:** Like, having been a teacher and, like, when I was, like, learning to be a teacher, they told us, like, when kids are in your care--like, when kids are in school, they are in your care, like...

**AM:** Mmhmm.

**PB:** Legally, you are responsible, like, and that's the state. Like, the state is responsible.

**AM:** Right.

**PB:** So, that's a huge contradiction, right?

**AM:** Right.

**PB:** Like, that you can have your kids taken if your water gets shut off at home, ...

**AM:** Mmhmm.

**PB:** ...but then if the city controls schools or charter schools or what have you and the water, there's lead in the water there, where's the accountability?

**AM:** [laughs] Even in that, when their school was starting, and all of a sudden, we got lead in our water, and it was handled, I mean, I kind of looked at it as a little trickery because it's like, Cass is a newer building, couple of other newer buildings were actually tested high levels of lead, and it's like, you know, I don't remember...I wasn't there 24/7, but I don't remember people coming in Paul Robeson testing the water, you know. I don't remember... Like my daughter, she said people were at her school testing water, but it's like, you know, the timing of how that came out, and then the...the contract that was with Aqua, the water company, and now with these filtration systems that are put in--like, Paul Robeson, we got ours in maybe two weeks ago, but they're still in the process of testing them before they fully turn them on. And so, when I asked Iris Taylor, the president, about--you know, 'cause they're looking at the dynamics of the community and thinking of closing and joining schools--and I said, "Well you know, you put all this money in the filtration systems going to every school, what happens when you decide to close these schools?" And her, you know, thing was, you know, we may lose some money, but we try to be proactive, you know.

And so, you know, eh, I don't, eh...it's still, even now, like the story came out about buildings needing so much money in repair. Paul Robeson is at two million dollars, by itself. I don't see any big, you know, issues of repair or, you know, that...that is needed, but I--just bringing it up to date, two million dollars, it's like one school. So, nobody wants to talk about the years that we were under emergency management. They did nothing to repair these schools. So now, this...Dr. Vitti's coming, you know, he's transforming the district and now we have to deal with major building issues. So it's like, where do you get the money from? You can't go up and beg Lansing anymore. I pray that they don't go and beg Dan Gilbert because he's already bought up half the city. I pray that they don't ask the Ilitches, but it's like, what do you do? Where are we going? Is that justification for more closures, or what are we doing? So, it's...it's...it's just constant of what's gonna happen next. But, I refuse to move my kids. I...I don't. My daughter's in eleventh. My other daughter's in the third, you know. I'm here to stay, but it's like, what are we...what are we looking at?

[1:23:25]

**PB:** I mean, and those people that you named are the very ones who are stealing money from the school district, right?

**AM:** [laughs]

**PB:** So like, as a parent and, like, having, seeing the...the school that your children attended...

**AM:** Mmhmm.

**PB:** ...closed down after this fight and then turn around and have all of these tax abatements and tax concessions given to these...

**AM:** Mmhmm.

**PB:** ...incredibly wealthy white men, like what, how does that make you feel?

**AM:** It makes me feel angry. I refuse to walk in Joe Lou--Little Caesars' Arena, for anything. Why? That money should have been paying teachers and upgrading schools. They just tapped into another fund, I was overhearing the other day, taking more money from our kids, putting it downtown for re-building. And then, what, you're gonna have a graduation ceremony in Little Caesars' Arena? You're gonna invite the kids to dribble a ball? [laughs] I mean, seriously, it just, it...it...it angers me, but I just have to keep informing people. Some people don't care, they're like, "Oh, Beyonce going in there? Girl, I'm in there!" I'm not going in there! I don't want anything to do with it, and...and I'm not ashamed to say why. But, I mean, it's like here in the city, I think once we went under emergency management through the city, a lot of people just felt beat down, you know. Let me just get away and go to a concert. That...that's...that's relaxing for me. Let me do my nine to five, let me pay my bills, let me live, and enjoy my concert and go back home and let these people handle this stuff. But in actuality, it's affecting everybody in this city, but it's a choice to care, it's a choice to do something, or it's a choice just to say, "Oh well. They're just gonna do what they're gonna do. Let me just live my life and try to function from day-to-day." I mean, that's honest, but your functioning depends on what's going on. It really does. You may not look at it like that, you know, "These people ain't paying my bills, that I'm working and taking care of myself," but the bigger picture is--especially if you have kids, especially if you're, you know, a long-time, tax paying resident--all of this stuff affects you. All of it. But, it's a choice. A choice to be engaged, a choice to be like this [covers face with hand] and just live. It's up to you.

[1:25:48]

**PB:** So I read--I try to do my own research to make sure, like, I'm up on, like, things that you've been involved with, things that you're organized, like...



**AM:** Okay.

**PB:** One of the things I came across was the Count Day protest...

**AM:** Oh yeah!

**PB:** ...in 2016.

**AM:** I for--you...you... [laughs] I...I forget stuff, you know! So much going on I hadn't thought about that!

**PB:** [laughs] That's why I'm here [inaudible]. Could you talk a little bit about that...

**AM:** Sure!

**PB:** ...like what the purpose was, like the organizing around that?

**AM:** Sure. I believe that came sh--either shortly after the teacher sickouts, I think?

**PB:** Right around the same time, right?

**AM:** Right! Okay, the parents that I work with at Paul Robeson, boisterous parents, vocal parents, and we wanted to do something because we wanted to make a statement, you know? Because they're so on us about come bring your kid, bring your kid on Count Day. They can wear free clothes, they get free pizza, free coupons, gift cards, just come so we can count 'em and your school can get the funding it needs. Well, you know, after building compliance so long, we said, well, what...what would happen if we don't come on Count Day? Even though we found out that it's a ten-day window in between that still get your count and your money

together. And so, our principal, which I...I do love him and respect him, you know, he said, you know, "You all parents. I can't tell you no, you know. It may be some backlash behind this, but do your thing." And so, me and another parent, we organized parents, we made a half-sheet flyer, we passed 'em out, same deal, going to cars, going to kids, going in each classroom, especially the middle school level, talking to them, letting 'em know the importance of what we're doing, and kind of breaking it down for the younger kids to let 'em know take this flyer home. Do not come to school. We had less than a hundred kids show up for Count Day, and that was the biggest thing in the district, you know, like. And they were looking at the principal, like, oh, you ain't got your...your parents under control.

So that's how they came at him, but our goal was just to show, you know, we have the power in this, and we're bringing our money to school, so we deserve art, music, and gym, and that was our main thing around Count Day because if you're bringing funding, why we don't have art, music, and gym? And so, that was the main reason why we did it because, you know, we saw our kids' report card. All of it was academics. No gym. No art. No music. I was in school in the [19]80s. We had gym, art, and music. All this technology, but the three basics to express yourself outside of academics, they didn't have. And so, that day--'cause our goal was you show up, we gonna rally around the school. We're not going in. We're just gonna rally around. And we didn't...we didn't have much of a turnout for that, but just the fact that less than a hundred kids came. We--to us, we did something. And so, of course, the district wanted to know why, and we let them know why. And of course, they were working on it. And true enough, to this date, Paul Robeson does have art and gym. We don't have music, but that was the...the main cause of that.

And just like with opting out. We also chose to opt out on the M-STEP, but ultimately that penalized us. So now, we're a priority school because they recorded those test scores, which were so low because, once again, less than a hundred kids took the test, so that was a strike against us instead of a positive. So, this year, we were gonna opt out. The principal like, "Man, you know. I feel y'all. Please don't do it. You know, please don't do it. I understand, but we trying to save the school." And it's like, we even told him, and he knew, you know, other suburban areas, they opted out, and it was just plain and simple. But us? We get penalized. There was no priority list for those suburban schools for opting out. They just did it, sent the note to school, my child will not take the M-STEP. Here you go. And it was okay, and so I--it was another group that I just contacted me

give-or-take a couple of months ago. They're, you know, suburban schools coming together, different teachers. They want to do that. They want to opt out to show that our kids are getting standardized tests to death. And I had to tell her, you know, sadly, I'll pass this information to other teachers, parents who want it, but I'm in a position where I want to opt out, but it's like, I don't want the school to close if I do. And so, we did that one year, just like with the Count Day, but we have back to business as usual, sadly.

[1:30:54]

**PB:** I was reading an article in Yes Magazine, ...

**AM:** Okay.

**PB:** ...and they had credited your Count Day protest as really like the starting point for the Detroit Independent Freedom School movement.

**AM:** That's correct!

**PB:** Could you tell us about that?

**AM:** Okay, because the idea was we're not gonna go to Count Day, but we still want the kids to get an education. And so...and God bless her, she has...she has since passed away. Her name was Miss Lila [Cabbil], and she was part of the water fighters. She has since passed, but that was her idea. She came to me. She said, "Well, this'll be the introduction of Freedom School." And so, I didn't take both of my girls to school, but after we did our little rally, I dropped them off at the freedom school location. And when I got there, it wasn't...it was less than four or five kids there, but it was all this media and they were waiting on a parent to interview. They interviewed me and another parent asking us why, you know, and even with the teacher sickouts, that could have been the alternative place for the kids to go, the Detroit Freedom School. But it dropped, you know. And they still

organized the Freedom School, and there's still locations mainly used throughout the weekend for Freedom School. But that was a good concept, but it just...it... I'm not gonna say it's not going anywhere 'cause they're still successful, but I dropped out of it. My daughter went on the weekends to the Freedom School, but she has now since entered another program. But just the...the momentum of the district, you know, going that way. As of now, it kind of dropped, but they're still active in organizing the Freedom School.

**PB:** Just as a time check, we're just about two o'clock.

**AM:** Okay. Whoo, that was quick!

**PB:** Yeah. Are you...

**AM:** I'm chatterboxing. I'm okay. [laughs]

**PB:** No, this has been great. And like, if you are okay with like keep going for a little bit.

**AM:** Yeah, I'm okay. Mmhmm.

[1:32:50]

**PB:** Everybody else good? Cool. Could you tell us a little more about the sickouts and like any involvement you might have had with, like, coordinating or anything? Tom Pedroni told us that some of those meetings were held at Dexter-Elmhurst [Center].

**AM:** Yes. And it's something because the three teachers that were very instrumental in creating that sickout work at Paul Robeson. Actually, it's four. They

call themselves the Mamas, and it's a group of four. Strong, excellent teachers and paraprofessionals, and they organized teachers, coming together to actually do that. And so, I wasn't instrumental in the planning, but definitely supporting them, going to their meetings. And that first or second sickout day, they actually protested in front of Fisher Building, and I was there. My kids were there. I heard the beautiful speeches, the kids singing, and it just felt good. It felt just like that last school board meeting this past Tuesday, all that energy. Teachers, they have been violated, you know, almost like brutally violated. Their pay has been cut, you know, supplies, this new curriculum that the district have purchased, you know, books with misprint and books with no pictures and links to homework and all this mess. But teachers coming together, and I love when they say enough is enough. I love it.

It's like, even with this school board meeting, the calendar. They were effective with the calendar going back to normal schedule because Vitti wanted us to start, I think, the third week in August. So now, we're going back to the regular calendar, but it's that strength that pushed them, even with the sickouts. They got that attention, but the momentum went down. And their thing is fear, too, because I talked to a lot of different teachers. Some of them are so strong, like the Mamas, but then you got the ones that are so scared. I don't want to get fired. I don't want to get written up. You know, but even those teachers talk to those teachers, like, come on. Either we're gonna rise together or we're gonna fall, but let's do it. You can't fire the whole district! And even looking at other states, they walk out but they get what they want! And this is Detroit, you know, the Motor City, we're supposed to be tough and bothered or whatever. And then it's like, you go in. And so, the sickouts, they were strong, the momentum was strong. They had a weak president of their DFT [Detroit Federation of Teachers] at the time--I feel she was weak, but I learned that she didn't even end up wanting that position. It was given to her, and so now it seems like they have a stronger president.

And hopefully, even after this meeting, they got the basics done for the calendar, but what about their pay? They don't have competitive pay! I'm listening to teachers. They're making almost 10,000 dollars less than the teacher across in the suburbs! And the dedication is there, the... Every teacher ain't the best, but the fact that they're here. Some of the teachers go over and beyond, buying supplies and all of that from their own pockets, taking time to really know the child, to know the individual child. I see that at Paul Robeson. You know, they know mom

and dad are having trouble, that's why you acting up, so I'm not gonna penalize you. I'mma help you, I'mma...I'mma, you know, put my arms around you and not just give you this book, but I'mma give you something to go here [touches heart] and here [touches head] to go along with that knowledge, and I see that. So it's like, I see that at one building, so I know it exists in other ones, but it's just the fear. Fear is so strong. And it's like, you go to school for this. This is the most important profession to me, because you literally shaping minds for other careers, but y'all get treated like dirt. And it's like, you so sacrificing, you so meek, you so humble, but it's like, sometimes you just got to say enough is enough.

And so, the sickouts was a beautiful thing. Like I said, the momentum dried down. They just did this Thursday, so I hope--I mean, Tuesday--so I hope it's...it goes. Because that was my next question. Room full of teachers, all you saw was red shirts. But I'm like, what's next? What is next to let them know y'all not playing? I talked to a teacher the other day. The 10,000 dollars that they took from them, that the state took from them, they gave it back, but they taxed it. So it's like, you're only still getting half your money, and it's like two percent that Vitti supposedly gave them back. That's money already due! But then, you're having all these job fairs--who want to come work here? If...if you're looking for qualifications, if you're looking for quality, you have to pay for that! But we got all this money to do all this extra stuff! I'm not disputing if you went to school and got your degrees, you deserve to get paid! He's what, 350,000 plus and just got a raise? His administrative staff--no Black males, I'm gonna say. He works with all women. Okay. But that's not okay.--But, all six figures. We're building new stuff, we're... You know, and that's all good, but you gotta pay your teachers. Don't nobody want to keep hearing there's not enough money and you're coming up with all this new stuff! The branding alone for the district, how many people--how many raises somebody could have got for that? We all, when students rise, we all rise. Excellent. We... I feel that. But how much did that cost? The things that don't really matter, that should be pushed to the side, and the teachers' pay--you could have a thousand job fairs! We need a secretary right now at Paul Robeson. Lady did the application. When she found out the pay, you think she came? No. I can't blame 'em. If you're certified, you do what you're supposed to do, you're supposed to get paid. So the teachers, the dedicated, really good teachers that are still here in this district, I, all I can say is that they have a passion for what they do. That's what brings them to work because otherwise, I mean, the pay. Okay. [laughs]

[1:39:13]

**PB:** Speaking of, like, on that topic of qualified, certified teachers, you and Yolanda Peoples and some others filed the lawsuit, right?

**AM:** Yes!

**PB:** Steven Rhodes...

**AM:** Yes!

**PB:** ...for hiring uncertified teachers.

**AM:** Yes!

**PB:** Could you talk about that?

**AM:** Well, that group Teach for America, I've been hearing them so often, and it's like, I haven't heard anything positive, you know, and people want to--and it seems like even with this district, it's going in a way where you're pushing seasoned, good teachers out the way to, in fact, put in young, maybe necessarily unexperienced with the culture and being able to break things down, and the thing of being uncertified, that just doesn't sit good with me. I mean, how can an uncertified person come in and say they're qualified to teach something that a person went to school and has left school, been in schools, and got that experience? You mean to tell me they're better, the person that's...that's coming in is gonna be better and have a better way of teaching and that is gonna be effective? That just doesn't sit well with me.

And with Miss [Helen] Moore and a couple of other ones said, “We’re gonna file this lawsuit. We need some plaintiffs.” [raises hand] I raised my hand, Yolanda [Peoples], we raised our hands. It’s a no brainer because it’s like I don’t want an uncertified person. Not to say, okay, you don’t have common sense, you don’t have the ability to teach, but why count out this person that has went to school, paid their dues, came out, has some experience, has some training in teaching in a public school with children, diversity, you know, many different children, learning how to connect with them, and I’m just supposed to accept you because you’re young, bright, chipper, and ready to go, but you’re not certified? Come on, now. Go to the charter school. Go there and teach. Start off there and then maybe get some experience and certification, then you come see me. But otherwise, no. So I mean, I was all in, you know, sign me up, sign my kids up for the lawsuit. So, that’s how that kind of came about.

**PB:** And then what came out of that lawsuit?

**AM:** We got like three different ones, so I mean I’m kind of all over the place, honestly, on the judicial side of it, but I just know when a meeting is called and I need to show up. But, as far as I know, it went into appeals or something. One of them went into appeal ‘cause we also have another one with Tom Blakely. Is that the same one?

**PB:** I don’t know.

**AM:** Okay. [laughs]

**PB:** ‘Cause I have trouble keeping track of ‘em.

**AM:** You know, it’s all over, but... [laughs]

**PB:** ‘Cause now there’s like the Right to Literacy set (??) of appeals, too.



**AM:** Yes. Yes.

**PB:** Did you have any involvement with that one or like been paying attention to any of that?

**AM:** Not really. But I know that the state had said that, you know, had... Didn't the state deem that they did not have obligation to give us a quality education, correct?

**PB:** So, what message does that send to you as a parent?

**AM:** That's basically saying the state say, hey, that ain't my problem. We don't...we don't...we not gon...it's not mandatory, you know. You get what you get, and that's frustrating, but it doesn't make me want to say nothing. It...it makes me want to keep going because you want to deem and say that, you know, my child and other children, you know, they're already almost casting 'em out before they even have a chance to...to succeed, just saying, oh, we don't...we don't have to do that for you. Why not? Why? Why don't you have to? And is that the same voice throughout the state of Michigan, or is it just Detroit? Because time and time again, Lansing has targeted, for whatever brutal reason. You just want to keep targeting Detroit, keep targeting our kids. And even in, I want to say, between the standardized tests and the sickout and the Count Day, we wrote Lansing. We wrote some of those Republican state reps that wanted to say that we didn't have the right to a fair education. We sent pictures. We sent a couple of letters from our middle school students expressing themselves, and we mailed it. We got back some flimsy response from one of 'em. Thank you for taking the time, you know, blah blah blah.

But it was just like, you know, we trying to even teach the kids just because someone thinks one way about you, you still continue to...to strive and try to be great regardless because it's people that want you in that jail cell. It's people that want you to fail, want you to get pregnant, want you to be a statistic, but we are here because we care and we want you to do otherwise. And so, that was another

reason why I started with the parent group just to give kids a balance. I remember going to school, and it was a balance. People that I thought weren't there, I come to find out they were volunteers. But their commitment was there every day and to give us a balance. And so, when I grew up, I'm like I want to do the same thing, and it's fun to me. My daughter is like, "You are such a boring..." She's like, "You so boring. All you do is PTA [Parent Teacher Association] stuff and all this and that."  
"

But, I'm like, it's fun because I do it for those kids. Like, we do student of the month, and for a kid to get a certificate and a gift card and to see their picture on the wall, or for them to just get the award, or paying the eighth graders' dues so they can have their cap and gown because they're having some hardship at home, that's what we do it for, so it's...it's...and it's a balance even in that because you're fighting so hard, but you're still trying to give the kids normal, you know. You're still trying to give them that everyday something to look forward to when they come to school besides the academics, and so that's the fun part, you know. That...that's the fun part, but then you still have to get serious and fight, you know. So even like when we go to these PTA conferences, you get the suburban schools, you know, they have...they have time to go into the art contest and the...to, you know, just do all these different things and explore different things, and it's like, we want to do that, but we're just trying to fight for our basic rights and then still give our kids a little something.

Even down to box tops, you know, you...you take the ten cents back and it's like we try to do that. You go out there, you got, people have bought their whole AC [air conditioning] unit for their school on box tops. That's dedication, you know, you got that extra time to push that. Hey, we're trying to get...make sure the teachers are straight, we're trying to make sure y'all got all y'all books, we're trying to make sure that we got--the art teacher got what he need. It's like a constant fight, but being in this, I love it. I wouldn't want to do it any other way, and...and I just pray that I become stronger and more confident and more factual in what I say and to be able to constantly bring change, constantly bring awareness to people. And, like I tell Miss [Helen] Moore all the time, I'm like I want to be like you when I grow up [laughs], flat out. Yep.

**PB:** I think a lot of us do. [laughs]

**AM:** Yes!

**PB:** Like, I...I just want to convince her to be like my surrogate grandma and to try to like....

**AM:** [laughs]

**PB:** ...teach me everything.

**AM:** And I get--even with that you get so much haters coming for her, and it's like... I had to stop somebody the other day. "She just want to take the limelight, she just..." And I'm like, "What are you doing? What are you doing? She could be on the beach, at the house, knitting or doing whatever. You're 20 years younger than her. What are you doing? What steps are you taking? What are you trying to do to make the road easier for her? Are you there to protect her? Are you there to...to give her something or to do your own thing and to speak up? But you want to hate on somebody that's constantly moving!" And so, my mom like, "You should have been shut 'em down!" But I'm like, you know, if I hear it again, I'm shutting it down, and I have to go to her and let her know, you know. And she like, "Oh, I'm used to that. I just ignore that, but thank you for telling me. I know how to approach that person, or I know where they at." And it's like, you get that. You get those haters that can try to sabotage something that somebody's doing that's doing it so greatly. It's like, join in! It's more energy to join in and it's...it's easier just to throw that hate on her and keep it moving to try to spread that. But then, you look at your life and it's like, what do you want those accolades? But you got to put in the work! Plain and simple!

**PB:** What's your vision for the future of Detroit schools?

**AM:** Hmmm...

**PB:** If you were...if you and Helen Moore and others, like, had your say, what would the school system look like?

**AM:** It would be full of certified, qualified teachers. Our special needs population would not be shunned on. They would have the resources that they need. Our trades would be stronger for our kids to be able to have set careers or pathway careers when they go straight out of high school. It would be placement--back like how my mom was talking about DPS [Detroit Public Schools]. You know, you had carpentry, you had seamstress, you had nursing. You know, she was able to start her nursing career. She's now a retired RN [Registered Nurse], but she was able to start her nursing in high school, and from that branched off to being a...a certified--I mean, nurse's assistant, LPN [Licensed Practical Nurse], and then she moved up, but she had that start in DPS. And some of the older ways that the system worked was good! To bring that back because half of the people, whether they're in Hollywood, whether they city officials, whether they're all over the United States, came from Detroit Public Schools, had nothing but good things to say about it. And it's like, all of that was good, all of that could come back, but instead...

That, that's what I see, just some of the original goodness coming back and producing greatness. Because regardless, even through emergency management, even what was said on the news, this district was still creating greatness. It was undercovered, it was unappreciated, it was un-talked about, but it still was happening, and it's still currently happening. But it's like that...that...that just that--what I want to say? I can't put it into words really, but just that narrative of just we're failures. We're failures. Our teachers are failures, and our kids are doomed to the streets, the jail cells, being pregnant early, you know, all of that. That narrative of us just not being good enough to succeed, that would disappear. That's what I see, and that the greatness would come out like how it did before, and it was producing--it's still producing greatness.

[1:51:09]

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

**AM:** Governor [Rick] Snyder. [laughs]

**PB:** Go ahead, go ahead!

**AM:** You know, reap it, man! Because in...in...in my time, he was the head caller, you know, he was the shot caller. And just the hatred that you have for the city of Detroit, the residents of this city to be able to manipulate us, bring our own people in here to...to ultimately destroy school systems, cities, families by, you know, forecl--all of that. And I just saw him on the news, with a full beard, attending that judge that just passed, his services. "He was a good man, bluh bluh bluh, civil rights, bluh bluh bluh..." What! You had the audacity to want to get on camera, after everything that you've done--and it did say former governor--but you can hold your head up high knowing what you did, and it's like him and every last flunkie that he hired, you know, you gotta reap it. You got to reap what you sow, and...and...and, like I say, you know, people, it's an afterlife, you know what I'm saying? And I mean, regardless of religion or whatever, we all have to go from here and it's something else that we have to go to based on how you treat people and what you do. And it's just like evil is...is real. Goodness is real. And it's like a...it's a constant battle and struggle, but it's like I choose the good side, you know. And I know that good, it prevails, but it's like that evil you just want to be like, ooh, when are you gonna get it back, you know?

But, you just got to keep fighting and know that it's gonna come back. It's gonna come back because it wasn't right, you know. Every decision regarding this district, just the hatred and the...the...the...the strategicness of how it's done--not just in Detroit, but in all these other inner cities--the breakdown of just trying to destroy, destroy before it can even become. And it's like, you get those that still rise, and you get those that fall into it but can still have the potential to do stuff, it's just a little harder, so that's my final words. You just gotta reap...you're gonna reap what you sow with that, because it just, it ain't right! [laughs]

You know, and it just make you mad, and this fight I understood how people go postal. You know, and I'm an artist, I...I do watercolor and acrylic, and it's like, instead of me grabbing a gun or a knife or something and just going up to the Fisher Building or something and just trying to hurt somebody, I just put it on canvas, you know. And so, that's it. I think that's it. You just gonna reap what you sow. That goes for all these city officials that...that's...that's hiding behind their titles and thinking they doing the [air quotes] "right thing" to keep [air quotes] "their stuff" in order.

But anytime you get a press of one--I'll leave it at this--we were talking during that closure, and I was talking about people and how...their unrest, and how they, you know, how do you sleep at night doing this to people. I didn't say her, but guess what she said? "I just want to people to know, I sleep good every night." You ain't got to tell me that if you really do. Just do it! So that lets me know you unrestly a little bit at what you're doing! People have a hard time to sleep. They got to medicate themselves to go to sleep 'cause you know you're not right! And so, that's it. [laughs]

**PB:** Yeah, hopefully some of these folks will be reaping jail cells soon.

**AM:** Please. Please!

[1:55:11]

**Herbert Taylor [HT]:** I have a question.

**PB:** Mmhm.

**HT:** Alright. With the Oak...I'm kinda going back...

**AM:** Yes.

**HT:** I'm going back to the Oakman situation. And with that, the school's population being...having...having such a high population of students with special needs. I know that there are a lot of special needs students outside of Detroit in these other school districts. How do you think that situation could have played out if some of the other districts supported you all with that initially?

**AM:** I think it would have turned out perhaps a lot different. But like I said, it's the separation between us. You know, we did get some calls from suburban people wanting to help, and their idea was to do the sit-in and just sit there and just don't let 'em close the building, but you know, realistically that couldn't take place, and so they kinda dropped off, but I believe if we united because we did have people that had just got to that school, just found that school. One example: we had a mom and dad, kindergarten. Their daughter had a feeding tube, and she required a one-on-one nurse in her classroom. They were in tears because they had found Oakman, and then once they found out that it was closed--and they were...I want to say they were Hispanic--and the...the anger, the mom just was crying. She was like, what are we gonna do now? And they tried their best to fight, but it dropped off, and so we weren't unified, honestly, with other people. It didn't last long because we were not willing to go those distances for what they wanted, and so it kinda dropped. But, I think if...if we were to be united, that school would still be open because it was absolutely, factually no reason for its closure and I... Yep. I honestly think if we were more united, it would have stayed open.

**PB:** Thank you.

**AM:** Thank you! [laughs]