

**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

**Yolanda Peoples**

Interviewed by

ORIANA YILMA AND PETER BLACKMER

May 24, 2019

Detroit, MI

## Narrator

Yolanda Peoples is a life-long Detroit resident, public schools activist, member of Keep the Vote/No Takeover, and a proud parent. As a public schools activist and member of Keep the Vote/No Takeover, Yolanda has supported efforts to regain local control of Detroit Public Schools, which was placed under a state-appointed emergency manager in 1999. Yolanda has been a leading voice in the resistance to emergency management and for improving conditions in the Detroit Public School system. She has voiced her concerns at board meetings and demonstrations, participated in lawsuits, and ran for an at-large seat on the Detroit Public Schools Community District Board of Education in 2016.

## Interviewer

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

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

## Abstract

Yolanda Peoples discusses her personal experiences as a parent fighting for her children's education under emergency management in the Detroit Public School system. She elaborates on the impacts of emergency management on Detroit's school system, the exploitative practices of the University of Michigan at the Detroit School of Arts High School, and the challenges of making your voice heard. As a life-long Detroit resident, she talks about gentrification and racial inequity in her neighborhood, Jefferson-Chalmers, a quickly changing landscape that once supported a vibrant community but is now predominantly abandoned. Yolanda discusses why social networks between parents, alumni, students, teachers, and grassroots organizations are critical to resisting oppression in the education system. She provides reflections on her organizing work with Keep the Vote/No Takeover and her relationship with Queen Mother Moore.

### Keywords

Charter schools; Community benefits agreement; Detroit Public Schools; Detroit School of Arts; Detroit, Michigan; Education; Education Achievement Authority; Elena Herrada; Emergency management; Helen Moore; Jefferson-Chalmers; Keep the Vote/No Takeover; Labor unions; Teach for America

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None

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Transcript of interview conducted on May 24, 2019 with:

Yolanda Peoples [YP]

Detroit, Michigan

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

[Pre-interview discussion]

**OY:** [laughs]

**YP:** Yeah, you know, because so many so many people come, and they want to interview us, but they're not really interested in the true story. And so, I don't talk to people.

**OY:** Uh-huh.

**YP:** [laughs] So, Mother [Helen Moore] said you guys were okay.

**OY:** [laughs]

**PB:** Which is like high recognition in my mind.

**YP:** Uh-huh.

**PB:** That actually might be something that we could talk about, if you want to, in terms of what that looks like in terms of people trying to co-opt stories or like how the media twists things or...

**YP:** How what I call transplants come here and want to make their name on our backs. Get your own story, you know. Get your own vision. Don't come here because it's already in existence. And then, you want to create something from it, too, for a name for yourself, but not to really help us.

So, I'm a graduate of Wayne State [University]. [laughs] I've got good experiences here.

**PB:** What program did you graduate from?

**YP:** Psychology undergrad.

**OY:** Oh, I'm majoring in psychology.

**YP:** Uh-huh.

[Pre-interview discussion ends]

**OY:** [laughs] Could you just give us your name, where you live, and your organizations and affiliations?

[0:00:00]

**YP:** Yolanda Peoples. I live in Detroit, Michigan. I am affiliated with Keep the Vote/No Takeover. I'm a parent of a DPS [Detroit Public School] student and DPS

graduate. I am a DPS graduate myself. I am also a member of Sacred Heart [Catholic] Church, which is in the Eastern Market. Yeah, that's pretty much it.

[0:00:32]

**OY:** So, could you describe your neighborhood growing up?

**YP:** [laughs] My neighborhood growing up is the same neighborhood I live in now, Jefferson-Chalmers. It was what they call now a walkable neighborhood. We had shops, bowling alleys, movie theatres, everything in our neighborhood on Jefferson between Conner and Chalmers, a lovely neighborhood that they're now trying to take over. So, they're trying to push most of the residents that stay there now out and bring in all the new people. It's near the river. It's about six blocks from Grosse Pointe [Michigan]. It's...the property values are through the roof, so.

[0:01:15]

**OY:** Well, how has the city changed since how it was when you were growing up?

**YP:** When I was growing up, I didn't really notice too much until maybe I got to the third grade. Like I said, living so close to Grosse Pointe, there were parks in their neighborhoods that were full of swings and all sorts of things that we didn't have in ours. So, we went to go over there to play. They got swimming pools, and there were some girls that we lived with--I mean, lived down the street from us. We'd go over to the Grosse Pointe to play. They were white. We were Black. [sound of phone vibrating] They would get in, and nobody would ask them for residency or where's your parents or anything. You know, me and my sister rolled up, we're on bikes, "Oh, wait a minute. You can't come in here." It's like, "They don't live here. How did they get in?" That was really the first time that I realized that things were going to be different for me. And also in the third grade, I was a student at [Joseph W.] Guyton Elementary School, which is a neighborhood school. We used to walk. It's two blocks from my home. [sound of phone vibrating] The--that's my phone. Sorry.

**PB:** You're fine.

**YP:** But... [rustling] So, the teacher, our music teacher Mrs. Sizencher (??), wanted to sing the Pledge of Allegiance and America the Beautiful every day, every day. So, I'm like, "Nope." Like, one day I said, "Nope. That's enough. I'm not doing it." So, she's like, "You have to stand up." "Nope, I'm not doing it." "Why?" "You see...you see all these Black people in here. We want to do the Black national anthem sometimes." Third grade. So, I got sent to the office. [laughs] But see, you have to stand up for something. My parents always stood up. They're very active in the union, very active with their employment. So, that's what I grew up with. It's all I know.

[0:03:09]

**OY:** What does racism look like in Detroit today?

**YP:** We had the riots in [19]67 when I was born. So, we're pretty close to that again, I feel.

[0:03:24]

**OY:** So, you mentioned your parents, but what or who have been your greatest influences in your organizing work?

**YP:** My parents, for real. My grandparents, they were from Tennessee, Alabama, but they were very strong individuals, taught us good work ethic, to get the value of education, to understand how that implemented your future, and what a difference it would make if you did not invest in yourself and your education.

[0:03:59]

**OY:** So, how did you first become an activist for racial equity and social justice?

**YP:** [laughs] Third grade. [laughs] When I got kicked out of that park for being Black, that started everything because I started asking more questions. Like, why are things different for me? My father worked at Ford Motor Company. His softball team played in Dearborn [Michigan], which was very white. We went to a park that had a pool, and they would not allow us to get in the water and swim. My mother was upset, but she couldn't do anything. She was crying. When she went to go tell my father, he wanted to protect us and react, but he couldn't because he knew if he did he would be treated one way and wouldn't be able to protect us at all. So, we had to kinda tuck those feelings away and learn how to deal with it in other ways, which really makes you become more active, more proactive to fight more, to get to the bottom of the reason why these people are so afraid of you. Why do you think my Black is going to hurt you? Why do you think my Blackness is going to rub off on you if we're in the same pool together? It's chlorinated. There's no way you can get a disease, so how can you get my Blackness? 'Cause it's not rubbing off. [rubs hands] This is who I am, but it doesn't have to be who you are. But, how do you treat me this way? So, my purpose is to understand, or at least try to. What makes you afraid of me? Because when it all boils down to it, you're afraid of me. Why am I the cause of your fear?

[0:05:44]

**OY:** Going slightly in like a different direction. Could you describe what the impacts of emergency management have been?

**YP:** So, emergency management--[laughs] Oh, God! So, let's just say that you have a box of rocks. The box of rocks is the emergency managers. The people who picked them up are the people who fund them, and they throw them where they want them to go, and where they land, then the people who fund them tell them what to do when they get there. So, emergency managers are no more than rocks that have been thrown somewhere and then given instructions on what to do.



[0:06:26]

**OY:** So, how does this relate to Keep the Vote/No Takeover?

**YP:** So, how it relates to Keep the Vote/No Takeover--I am a new member compared to all the other existing members. So, I started with Keep the Vote/No Takeover probably around 2010 or 2011. My daughter was in high school at the Detroit School of Arts, and so we were having problems with the University of Michigan coming and taking over. Wayne State [University] was already a part of our school. We got our student teachers from Wayne State. They would ride out their bikes, skateboard, walk, do whatever. They were already part of the community. There was not a disruption in the student...teacher-student relationship. There was...it was a very good cohesive family environment.

University of Michigan puts their building on the corner of Mack and Woodward. Then somehow when Dr. [Denise Davis-]Cotton retired, they wanted to come in and take over. So, what they did was--Dr. Cotton was a force that kept all of the things outside that were not good at bay. She kept them away from DSA [Detroit School of Arts] and wouldn't allow them to take over, just her being there. When she left, all the vultures came, the Stuart Frankels through Peter Cummings and the Max Fisher. All of those people got involved. We already had relationships that existed prior to this involvement with University of Michigan. Doug Ross, the little weasel, who was in charge of the--I have to be honest. He's totally a weasel. But, he was in charge of the Office of Innovation at the time, a graduate of the University of Michigan, taught in DPS schools in the [19]60s but was fired. He was fired for creating this teaching method because he felt like urban children did not learn the same as suburban. So, he created this new teaching method, and that's what he got fired for.

So, he came to our school. He was the spokesperson. The University of Michigan people were surrounding him like, "Oh, we're going to come to this school, make it great, better, whatever." How you going to do this? These things already exist. "Oh, we're going to take you, give you a relationship with the DIA [Detroit Institute of Arts]." We have that. "Oh, we're going to build a relationship with this place. "

We have that, too. Mosaic Youth [Theatre of Detroit], we have that. What are you talking about? Max Fisher, we have that. [laughs] What...what are you doing here?!? So, he wanted the parents to buy into his creation, which was built on something that already existed. So, how do you come here and tell us you're gonna come here to do something, and it's already been done? Do I look stupid? No, I'm not. I wasn't born yesterday. I'm not buying into that.

So, I know I got off track. [laughs] But, the whole point I'm trying to make is if I came to your neighborhood with my ideas to tell you that my ideas are better than what already exists in your neighborhood, would you allow me to come in there? Would you welcome me with open arms? Would you even listen to my story? No. So, why do you think I would listen to theirs?

[0:10:12]

**OY:** You spoke a little bit about transplants in the media and trying to create a certain story. So, could you just describe the relationship between mainstream media and then alternative media on the other hand?

**YP:** Alternative meeting--media?

**OY:** Yes. Like, you worked on the film *Built and Rebuilt* [ : *The Detroit School of Arts Story*] with Kate Levy. It's like things like that that tell a story from the people's perspective.

**YP:** Right, so we asked Kate to come. We asked for her assistance because nobody would come hear the parents because we were talking about the great U of M. They wouldn't believe that these people from U of M were doing such horrible things. So, in order for us to do that, we had to tell it in a story. Right? We had to get all of these interviews together. We had to tell...let the children tell the story how they felt every year getting a new principal, every year losing teachers, every year losing programs, have you walk through the building and show you that the editing rooms that were there they can't use, that the TV station--I mean, the TV

rooms, the green rooms they can't use. They have five computer labs, but they can only use three. They had two or three auditoriums, a black box, but they were very rarely used. We had to tell that story 'cause when my daughter first started there, I felt like I was in the middle of Fame 'cause kids were skipping and running down the hallways. It was just a beautiful experience. And, to have lost that because somebody wants to come in and make their school of architecture, which is the secret we found out. They're still...I don't know their plans on that, but they just haven't come to fruition because they can't empty the building.

[0:12:01]

**OY:** Could you describe the events that led up to a meeting with emergency manager [Steven] Rhodes? Specifically, one where there is a video of you...

**YP:** Yelling. [laughs]

**OY:** [laughs] ...yelling in the background.

**YP:** So, they weren't letting me talk, but I had to be heard. And so, I am a believer in you have to stand for what you really truly believe in or else just give up and roll over. So, I'm yelling in the background because I have all this information that they're trying to talk about, and he just walks out. I took my son out of school, and I was upset. And so, I had to tell everybody how upset I was and what I had gone through to be there that day.

And, when you talk about activists and people who are committed to trying to make changes, there's not money in it. We don't do this for fun. This is a commitment we make because it impacts our lives. If I don't do this, my life is going to be different, you know. Not just my neighborhood, my life. The options and opportunities that my children have, my grandchildren, my life. This is nothing to play with. I make light of it because that's what you have to do when you're in it every day. But to get through it, it takes tremendous strength. It takes networking and leaning on people who are going through the same thing. We have so many

fighters going on at one time: fighting the water, fighting the deportation of our residents and friends, fighting the fact that our young people are getting killed, [laughs] and our education. They start building prisons based on the children's grades and test scores in the third grade. What kind of shit is that? How do you do that? And then, you tell a parent who's trying to sue the State of Michigan that her child doesn't have the right to a high level of education. She doesn't have the right, but then you turn around in that same breath and say, "But your children coming out of the third grade, if they can't read, we're gonna hold them back," and you do nothing to provide support to make that happen.

[0:14:39]

**OY:** I definitely want to come back to the part about...with suing the emergency manager. But first, I want to talk about just interactions in general with the emergency managers about the--basically, since emergency management takeover of the public school district.

**YP:** So, we were kicked out of meetings. So, you're talking about interactions with...?

**OY:** Yeah.

**YP:** There wasn't any. In order for interactions to take place, you kind of have to barricade yourself, catch them when they're walking down a hallway, surround them so they can't move, and you're constantly getting pushed by their security. So, only one guy was successful in locking into a corner Jack Martin. He was at DSA, and I caught him on his way out. So, me and another parent, we're running across the auditorium, we pushed the security guard [laughs] out the way and had to go out the door. Then, in the corridor, he's trying to pacify us and answer a couple of questions. But, there's no end result. So, we caught him in a hallway, we're yelling at him because he's making all these changes. 500,000 dollars was missing from DSA's budget that nobody could account for. Roy Roberts was just saying, "The school is in charge of it." The board is saying, "Roy Roberts is in

charge of it.” Where’s the money? Why are you still closing our programs? U of M schools be so great nothing happened.

So then, parents got together, and we went to one of their board meetings at the University of Michigan in Flint [Michigan]. So up there, they were still looking for a president at the time. So, it’s my turn to speak. I told them that they didn’t have to look any further. I knew who the perfect president would be. They said, “You know nothing,” because they can’t say anything. I said, “Me.” I said, “The first thing I’m gonna do is shut down your music program, and I’m gonna shut down your art program because they’re too costly.” Everybody said, “Oh.” I said, “The second thing I’m gonna do is steal some money and make it disappear.” [gasp] “Oh!” Well, I didn’t say those words, but they got the jist of it. And so, they’re just looking at me like, “Where is all this coming from?” Then, I told them I was a parent from DSA. University of Michigan came and took over our school, and this is what happened. They shut down our art program. They tried to involuntarily remove nine teachers. We got eight of those nine back; the parents did. We went to Channel 2, and Andrea Isom did a story on us. We were able to get eight of those nine teachers back, but it is draining, and they push you to the limit ‘cause they know you don’t have money. They know you don’t have financial resources, and, pretty soon, people get tired. And so, all the parents I fought with at DSA, once their kids graduated, “Whew. Okay, we’re done. On to the next fight.”

[0:17:57]

**OY:** You also mentioned you had taken your son out of school the day of the meeting with the...that you referred to.

**YP:** Yes, I did.

**OY:** So, could you speak a little bit about just the importance of involving youth in this type of work?

**YP:** My children call me the crazy lady, [laughs] and, you know, I have to remind them that. So, let me go back. We're talking about my son, but I'm gonna talk about my daughter first. She started at DSA in the ninth grade. Dr. Cotton retired at the end of that year. So, I tell her, "Nope. We're going someplace else. Dr. Cotton is gone. Some things are going to change." "No, I want to be with my friends." [sigh] "If you stay here, I'm gonna fight." So, she just looking like, "Uhh. [sigh]" I said, "You stay here, I'm gonna fight. You know what that looks like, right?" So, she's going, "Yeah, Mom. Okay, alright." So, she was ready.

She came from Spain [Elementary-Middle School]. Spain is also a school in the medical center, which the medical center wants that property for whatever reason. They put a clinic behind Spain with a methadone clinic in it. So, you have long-term heroin users coming all through the school property to get to that clinic in the back. So much stuff going on. There was an incident with the roof leaking, the building not being up to code. Ellen [DeGeneres] donated the 500,000 dollars that they were trying to misappropriate. I got involved with that, of course, because my son was still going there.

But, getting the youth involved and trying to teach them by the actions that you do and the actions you take helps to build them their future, tell them why it's important to do these things 'cause you're not telling them not to stand up for something. You're not telling them to roll over and take anything. You're showing them the way, how to do it, how to get in touch with people, how to network, how to contact people, how to do your research. You can't just go willy-nilly saying things. You have to do your research. You have to get the truth behind it.

I can't sit here and tell you Doug Ross was fired in the 1960s if I didn't know that for sure. I can't sit here and tell you he was a jerk [laughs] if I didn't know that for sure. I can't put it on the piece of paper, but I can show you by the decisions that he's made in his life and how they've impacted the public as to why I call him a jerk. So, that's my personal opinion of him, not something that's written down. It's not a fact. It's my personal opinion. But, the fact is he was fired for creating this nonexistent teaching method that he tried to utilize. He was fired for that. That is the truth, and he will not tell you that. He tells you how a great business man he is and how he's done all these great things, but he doesn't tell you all the people he

stepped on in order to make those things happen. And so, I tell you that part of the story because it is true and it was researched.

[0:21:07]

**OY:** What does that research process look like?

**YP:** As a parent, if you don't know where to go to find information, it runs--it ends very fast because you're asking a couple of questions, and people don't tell you. And so, if you don't know where to go or what to look for, then it ends. So, the Keep the Vote/No Takeover is where I went to when I ran into my brick wall and other groups like that. That's where you get your strength from. That's where you get your information from because they have researchers in there that have been doing this for years. They can give you the information and tell you where it was found, how to prepare yourself, go talk to the people at the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] if you want to do this. If you're trying to get this or you want the FOIAs [Freedom of Information Act], this is how you write it. All that training comes from those strong groups.

[0:22:05]

**PB:** Can I ask a question?

**OY:** Yeah.

**PB:** So, is that--I'm really curious how you first got involved in educational organizing. So, is that what the process is? You don't--your daughter decided she wanted to stay at DSA. You started--you said you were gonna fight. You did your research, you hit a wall, and then you got involved with Keep the Vote?

**YP:** That was one. So, the smaller ones was when they were trying to get rid of the principal at Spain Elementary School. The one before that was when they were gonna close Guyton Elementary School in my neighborhood. So, we fought to save that. We were able to keep it open an additional two years, but they still ended up closing it even though all the parents said no. We came out. We protested. We showed why it was important. We showed how it was important because we were sending our children there. They still closed it anyway. So, in order for your children to go to school, you have to get up at six in the morning, 5:30 in the morning, to get them to school by seven because you have to drive or get them on the bus.

When they used to be able to walk, come home for lunch, and go back to school, those things don't exist in our neighborhoods. But, they did when I was growing up. I didn't have to wear a uniform. I didn't have to go through a metal detector. These are the same kids, the same kids that leave Detroit. They don't go to school with metal detectors, and they're not getting kicked out everyday. So, why would we need them? You create a mentality, and then you get a reaction, and you go, "Oh see, we told you we needed metal detectors." No, you need metal detectors because you put that in their heads, and then the children react to it, and you're upset and say, "I see, ahah." No, I told you. Get rid of the metal detectors, and it will change the children's behavior because then they feel like they have choices. They have options. If you take away children's options, their ability to express themselves, then, yes, they will act like animals because you're treating them like animals.

[0:24:14]

**PB:** Could you also...could you explain how important for the record...like, for the record how important it is to have neighborhood schools and, like, what the impacts are when neighborhood schools are closed down?

**YP:** The impact of closing down a neighborhood school is abandoned homes, families leaving because they don't have options in their neighborhood. When our neighborhood was walkable, we had an elementary school, we had an elementary school on a different side of our neighborhood, and then we had a middle school



in the middle. We had an elementary school just north of Jefferson. So, there were like three elementary schools and one middle school all walkable. Right? The high school was close enough to be walkable to Southeastern.

But when [Rick] Snyder did his little government experiment, the EAA [Education Achievement Authority], and all those children for those three years fell way below what their educational academic achievements were prior to putting it to the EAA. We lost that whole generation in those three years. Do you know how difficult it is to make up a three-year drop in your academics? I can't quote statistics, but if you started out in high school at a ninth grade level, and then your tenth grade year you're in the EAA, and they're telling you, "Here. Learn this however you can. And then, we're going to test you on it. I'm not the teacher. I'm not going to teach you. I'm just going to stand here and make sure you're doing the work." We have tons of children that came in and testified, crying at the Friends Auditorium in the library, testifying to how drastically those academic changes were that impacted them, how it took away from their ability to learn the foundation. So if you don't have a foundation, what happens? You can't build anything, not even a future. So, what do you do?

[0:26:47]

**OY:** I want to go back a little bit. You mentioned specifically with like Guyton, for example, how you were able to keep it open for an extra two more years before it was closed. So, what did that look like? Basically saying, "Okay, I know I want to keep this school open." How do you find other people that also have that same goal?

**YP:** So, all the parents got together, and we were like, "Okay, this is what they're saying they're gonna do. And what...what...how do we fight it?" So, we fought it by contacting downtown--downtown being the administrators of DPS--telling them what we did want, what we didn't want, what did that look like. My children started school under emergency management. That's how long it's been around. The state has been in control of our schools since my children have been in school, when my daughter was born in 1995.

So, I didn't... If I hadn't gone to DPS, I would not have known the greatness of it, and I may have had a different vision. So, some of our younger parents who didn't know what it was like back then, it's difficult for them to understand unless they came from a family that said, "No. Education is important. It didn't always look like this. You know, we used to have schools in our neighborhoods." The parents are the strength. The parents have to understand what strength we have to make the changes. If parents don't recognize their strength, things are not gonna happen. Keep the Vote/No Takeover is full of people who are passionate about public education, but if they don't have parents involved, things are not gonna get changed.

[0:28:39]

**OY:** Could you describe the origins of the civil suit that you and other parents filed against Steven Rhodes?

**YP:** There were so many lawsuits. What...what exactly do you want to know?

**OY:** Basically, how it came about that you make the transition from saying, "We're fighting against this and advocating against this," to "We're going to file a lawsuit?"

**YP:** [sigh] We weren't getting anywhere. We were protesting. We were showing documentation. We were going to different board meetings, different... We went to Lansing [Michigan] quite a few times to protest, to say how this is impacting our--nothing was being changed. We have people making decisions about what's going on in the city of Detroit that are not impacted by its immediate results.

So, again, like I gave you the example about coming to your neighborhood to make changes when things are already great there. If I'm making decisions about your neighborhood, about education, about the cost of auto insurance, and the people who live there don't have to vote for me, I'll say and do whatever I want to. If a

lobbyist comes and says, “Hey, if you make Detroit insurance higher, we’ll give you a couple hundred thousand dollars.” I’m not connected. They don’t vote for me, so who cares? It’s a total disconnect in the people who make decisions on what goes on in our city and the people who actually live there. It’s a disconnect. They don’t see us as being able to make any difference. We don’t have money, so we can’t pay into their campaign fund. If we could pay into their campaign fund, things would look a lot different. That’s why they call us grassroots. Right? Grassroots is synonymous with no money. [laughs] So, they try to make it sound nice, but that’s what it means, no money. So, you have no money. You’re not making any policymakers fatter, so they’re not gonna support your policies unless it makes them look good. Then, they might do it for a little while, but not for a long time because you have people that can actually pay them to make decisions.

[0:31:14]

**OY:** So, what were the impacts of filing the suit about uncertified teachers in Detroit Public Schools?

**YP:** The impact?

**OY:** Yes.

**YP:** When we were trying to get rid of Teach for America... I don’t know. I’m not sure yet. I’m really not sure what the impact was because we still have people who are not highly qualified. Those people still exist, and they’re still in our schools.

[0:31:49]

**OY:** Could you tell us what the effects were of the state’s reorganization of the Detroit Public School District in 2016?

**YP:** Hiding. Hiding and covering up. That's what I call it. The big cover up. The fake out. How do you reorganize, and you don't file bankruptcy? How does that happen? That's supposed to be legally impossible. Right? You're not supposed to reorganize unless there is some financial bankruptcy. We have a financial review board. They're still making decisions about our money, but we didn't file bankruptcy. So, how does that happen? Where did all that money go? Where did all the bond money go? It didn't go into the couple of computers they said the teachers took. [laughs] It didn't go in the gift cards a couple of the principals took. It didn't even go in that fancy car that they say one principal bought. That didn't--that wasn't bond money. But, that's the smokescreen that's used as a distraction to get you off target to what's really happening.

[0:33:07]

**OY:** Could you speak a little bit about what goes into returning to local control the schools after emergency management?

**YP:** Okay. So, what would go into it--because it hasn't happened yet. So, you want me to tell you the dream? The fairytale?

**OY:** Yeah.

**YP:** So, the fairytale of it all is we would be able to make our own decisions. We would not be impacted by the policymakers because we would control all of that. Our children would go back to soaring. They would go back to doing well. Our principals would be empowered again, able to make each campus great. When I was a kid in DPS, each school had something great about them. It wasn't just three good schools, King [High School], Cass [Technical High School], and Renaissance [High School]. Every school was great. Every school had something to offer. That's what my district should look like. That's what local control looks like. Every school have something to offer. You're not just going to make people fight over two, three schools. That's ridiculous. I need to have options. [laughs] My children need to have options. The whole district needs to be great, not just two

or three schools. That's ridiculous. That's what non-local control looks like. We make you fight over stuff, and then whoever falls out gets the scraps.

[0:34:47]

**OY:** I understand that there was a court opinion filed in February of this year [2019] with the case John Telford vs. the State of Michigan. So, could you just elaborate a little bit about what that case is, what that was about?

**YP:** [sigh]

**OY:** As much as you can.

**YP:** Welp, not really. But, I believe his case was about the special needs population, but I don't really... No, I can't really speak on that 'cause, again, nothing has changed.

[0:35:22]

**OY:** Could you speak a little bit about charter schools and the impact of privatizing public education?

**YP:** Utilizing public funds 'cause that's what it boils down to. So, private schools couldn't make it, so they created this policy that changed what private schools looked like. So, the private-public school is the charter school. It has their own school board. They're not held to the same accountability as public schools, but they get to utilize public funds. Even if they take the money and create this charter school, they could shut down in that year that they opened right after count day, collect that money, and still not be held accountable for what happened, why they closed. They're not held to the same accountability as for testing, for providing services, for special needs kids, for high academics, for highly qualified teachers.

They don't have any of that. If they shut down and the kids don't have a place to go, guess where they go? Back to DPS. Guess who has to take them? DPS because they're mandated, right? The money doesn't follow the children. So then, this charter school has all the money, and I get stuck with the kid with no services, no supports, but I still have to provide something for them. Right? My classes are already overcrowded, but I make room anyway because that's what public schools are about.

[0:37:11]

**OY:** What connections do you see between the water crisis, destruction of the public schools, the foreclosure crisis, and inequitable development in Detroit?

**YP:** Development without--I mean, development with displacement. The fastest way to shut a city down is to take away its resources and to shut down their schools. So, they want their city back, and they'll get it by any means necessary.

[0:37:39]

**OY:** What are some of the most valuable lessons that you've learned in your organizing work?

**YP:** Sometimes, it's best to be quiet and listen. The spook near the door. Be quiet. Watch and listen. You learn so much. That's what they always say, "Yolanda, she's so quiet." Nope. I'm observant, and then I come out. [laughs] They say, "Where'd this girl come from? Who is that? What's that person?" Yeah, no. I've been watching for a long time, and I keep it because I am a person that gets my strength from darkness. They always want to say darkness is bad, it's horrible. No, it's not. It's a place of peace. It's quiet. Nobody is disturbing you. You sit there, you think, and you organize. You strategize. You get your strength from darkness.

[0:38:37]

**OY:** Can you talk about any resistance or oppression that you've faced?

**YP:** All the time. [sigh] This...this is what I get multiple--"Here she comes," you know? I'm like, "Hi, how are you doing?" But, I have to--I can't stop. I don't care. Your private thoughts are not my business. So, I don't care what you think about me. All I care about is what I need to do for my children and the children that they go to school with.

**OY:** What words of advice do you have for other parents with children in the Detroit Public School system who are...who might be concerned?

**YP:** Call me. [laughs] If you have questions, I'll help you, and you don't have to pay me anything.

[0:39:35]

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

**YP:** Back to the fairytale, huh?

**OY:** [laughs]

**YP:** So, if we had an equitable society, it would look like... Hmmm... There would be no charter schools. Water would be free. DTE [Detroit Edison Energy] would be a public place, not a private company. Everybody and their momma would have solar and windmills in their backyard. [laughs] Right? There would still be neighborhood schools. There would still be neighborhood everything, and every neighborhood would be great. We would all... Every neighborhood would have something great going on in it because the people there are great.

[0:40:34]

**OY:** Who else do we need to speak with to get the story straight about struggles for racial inequity in public education?

**YP:** Victor Gibson. Let's see. Did you speak to Monica Johnson (??)?

**OY:** No, we didn't.

**YP:** Mmm. She's more of the water. Meeko [Williams]--I can't think of Meeko's last name. He's water also. But they're all connected. I can't send my children to school if we don't have water. We can't eat if they don't have water. They're taking our homes if we don't send our children to school, if we don't have water. And, they want to come in now and do all this testing even if you're not a landlord, even if you're not a renter. You're the homeowner, they're still trying to get in your home and do testing because that's how they're going to displace us.

[0:41:32]

**PB:** Are you in the impact area for the Fiat Chrysler?

**YP:** Yes.

**PB:** Have you been...

**YP:** Yes, on Jefferson Chalmers.



**PB:** Have you been part of those meetings that have taken place like in all a part of the struggle that's going on?

**YP:** Did you see me roll my eyes?

**OY:** [laughs] Yeah.

**YP:** Okay. So, the thing about meetings are--I used to go them a lot, but it just frustrates me. They come with these beautiful beautiful breakdowns of our neighborhood and what they look like and what they could look like. So, they give you what they look like now, and then this is the future. "Oh, isn't this beautiful? And, this is walkable, and this is..." When did I get a chance to sit down for this part of it? You came here with this already done. So, you already had the discussion. So, that means decisions have already been made. So, if I wasn't at the table for that, why are you coming to me now? Because what I'm saying to you doesn't matter. It's already done.

So, when I call the guy out on that [laughs]--and at the last meeting I went to, the next thing I know there was a sticker on my door that I had violated a public works law or order 'cause my grass behind my garage was over eight inches, and this was done a Friday after three P.M., and I had until Monday to get it all cleaned up. That's what happens when you speak out. There was a correlation there. I spoke out at a meeting. The guy who I embarrassed was in a position to shut me down, and if I didn't have resources, it would have shut me down 'cause I'm not a person that can get back there. I don't have a weed whacker and all that stuff to take care of what needs to be taken care of behind my garage that fast. It was just the beginning of spring. So, snow was just melting. I hadn't gotten to the point where I cleaned up behind my home yet.

So, you're going to get me for embarrassing you at the meeting because I'm calling you out on not really including us on the decision making that is going on in my neighborhood. You're not including me in the decisions, but you want me to sit here and grin, and you want me to say that what you're doing is great and okay. It's not great and okay. And if it was, I would be included before decisions are

made 'cause I have a lot to say. I grew up here. I came back here. So, that means this neighborhood means something to me. My parents still live there. My brother lives around the corner from me. I have an aunt two blocks away from me. We live here. We're here. We're committed to this neighborhood. I remember when there was an Albert's [Furniture], a Winkelman's, a movie theatre, a bowling alley, all that stuff--a dance hall--all that was right there. The bike shop. Everything. Plus, all the schools I told you about. We rode our bikes everywhere. They had concerts at the park, Ford Park they call it.

So now, they're getting ready to take over Ford Park, and the handicap center [Lenox Community Center]. Penske [Corporation] is doing that now. Were we invited to that conversation? No. It's right on the water. Do you know how much money they make for stuff that's right on the water? Do they need our opinions? No. They have all the money. They do what they want to do, but not to those people six blocks away. They don't do that over there. They come together and fight. When we learn to come together and fight, these things won't happen.

[0:45:39]

**PB:** Did you have any conversations with Mama Myrtle Thompson-Curtis or Jerry King, Coach [Kellogg], any of them who were trying to put together like the community proposal for the CBA [community benefits agreement]?

**YP:** Jocelyn [Harris]. Jocelyn and my mom are working together on that, but I go to some of the meetings. There is Jocelyn, my mother, Linda (??) through the Jordan church [Jordan Missionary Baptist Church] where that vacant property is off Newport [Street], and there's...there's a guy who put a garden behind the church. He didn't own the property. Nobody had sold it to him, but he put a garden there. And then, he would take the goods that were grown in the garden and take it out to different farmer's markets in the suburbs and sell it. How do you do that? [laughs] You just throw some seeds down. [laughs] Nobody holds you accountable for that, and you could take the produce and go sell it and make money. Then, he got a deal with the Kresge Foundation. They gave him money. So now, he has nine plots of property on a street in our neighborhood where he's growing things and making money. But how do you do that off of stealing the property? [laughs] How

you do that? If I had done that, there would have been all kinds of fines and everything going on. But, he was able to do that, and now it's a mess 'cause nobody is taking care of it, right behind Jordan church on Newport.

[0:47:20]

**PB:** And, that...that sounds a lot like--maybe on a different scale. I live in Southwest [Detroit], and what the Morouns have been doing over there with blocking off streets, occupying land, putting fences around public lands and through the...

**YP:** But, they've owned that property for years.

**PB:** City-owned land.

**YP:** But, the--they gave them Southwestern High School even though Western is overcrowded. Southwestern had just been remodeled, had updates done to it, all those things, and you still tear it down to nothing? For a second bridge? Really? How do you do that?

**PB:** I mean, what are we to make of all this?

**YP:** Money rules the world, and nobody else counts. If you have enough money to get you at the table, you get at the table. Even though I really truly believe that a lot of what we do is you get what you negotiate for, like me standing up in the third grade being able to sing the national anthem that is for the Black people. I did that because I believed that if I stood up, I would make a change. Even if you're knocked down 15,000 times, you still have to get up and try. But if we do that collectively, as a larger group, it will really make a different impact, and we will get more change. It can't just be one person here, one person there. We're never going to get anywhere with that. It will tire us out first. That's why we have all these multiple lawsuits. They're wearing us down. My mother has been doing

this since the [19]70s, right? I just got started, and I'm already tired. I have a son that hasn't graduated yet. I have nieces and nephews that are still coming through here that are not as old as my son. I can't stop, but I'm tired. I'm exhausted, but I can't stop.

[0:49:35]

**PB:** I think one of my questions that doesn't get asked enough with folks doing organizing work is: how are you taking care of yourself?

**YP:** [laughs] We're on camera. [laughs] So, I'm a little bit older than everybody in the room, but most of the time I read. It's peaceful. Like I said, I sit in the dark, and that's my other set of peace. I do try to stay up on things that are current. I talk to people in my neighborhood, see what's going on, what did I miss out on. Gail Beasley is the one that brought to my attention that we had coyotes in the neighborhood 'cause I hadn't even heard that. Yup, and there's a rumor that somebody is dropping them off because where did they come from? We didn't have coyotes when I was a kid coming up. Somebody had to bring a coyote over there 'cause they can't just grow out of the bush. [laughs] So, where did the coyotes come from? I don't know, but we do have coyotes over there now.

[0:50:46]

**PB:** I'm curious about--you mentioned that your parents were involved with--your dad worked at Ford. Your parents were involved with...

**YP:** The unions.

**PB:** ...the unions. What kind of influence...what kind of lessons did they pass on to you about organizing? How did their involvement with labor organizing influence your development?

**YP:** [sigh] So, with my dad, he worked for Ford, and he was part of [United Auto Workers] Local 600. We had to march in that Labor Day parade every year. He put my mom through school. And when she became a teacher, we marched with her and him. But, coming together, hearing the stories that the unions created fair wages, safe work environments, opportunities for people that may not have had the ability to be hired had the unions not existed. Those things are so important, and when you put them in the perspective of education, it's the same thing. Qualified teachers. You don't want somebody who's not qualified in your child's classroom with them six or seven hours, not six or seven minutes. If they're not coming there prepared to give them the information that they need, you don't want them there. But, the unions help to make sure that those things are in place. The unions were created for safety, for livable wages, and for opportunities, and we still need them.

[0:52:25]

**PB:** I'm also wondering... We've spoken to quite a few folks--Queen Mother [Helen] Moore, Tom Pedroni, Aliya Moore--and I think there's value in repetition here because there's so many narratives out there about the Detroit Public Schools. In your words, can you kind of just give us the story as you understand it of the history of state takeovers of the Detroit Public Schools or state intervention in the Detroit Public Schools?

**YP:** So, as I understand it, the state takeover first happened in 1999, and the emergency manager was an appointed person by the governor. That lasted for a couple years. That person created a board that was there. That--they took that back and gave it back to the city--I mean, gave it back to the school. And then after that, [Jennifer] Granholm brought in Robert Bobb, and then it stayed until [Steven] Rhodes.

[0:53:37]

**PB:** And, when do...when do school closures, like, really pick up during this timeline?

**YP:** With Robert Bobb. So, the school closures really really escalated under his emergency management tenure, and when my brother graduated from high school--he graduated from high school in 1995. He graduated from Davis Aerospace [Technical High School], which was still at the airport, right? So, they created this narrative that made it seem like children were fighting over not having name-brand stuff, clothes, shoes, which is why it was important to do the uniforms, which is why it was important to keep the control and keep the kids walking down one side of the hallway going this way and coming back this way. But if you look at any prison, the behavior is the same: the uniforms, the fact they can't talk in the hallway. They can't talk at lunch. They can't talk period. They can't even think.

When I was coming up, the programs that were put in place made you think. Even writing in cursive, you have to think about, "Okay, if I do it this way, it's a 'p.' If I do it this way, it's a 'g' or a 'q.'" You know, you had to really think about that stuff. That...that's not there anymore. The critical thinking piece has been taken out of education. Our children are being dumbed down. They have smart phones but dumb users. You know, that's what I call our technology today. I used to be able to remember every telephone number that I dialed. Not anymore. Just ones I dial frequently.

Emergency management magnified everything that was wrong with public education. Public education's not perfect, but it's what we need. And if controlled locally, it is great and wonderful because the people who it impacts are going to make the right decisions.

[0:56:08]

**PB:** I'm thinking of the repercussions of when local communities don't have control over their schools, when answers are sought outside. We think about Teach for America, for example. Could you kind of walk us through--like, we

touched on it a little bit, but--why? We were...we were talking about this before. Why is it in Detroit that we have to fight for certified, qualified teachers? And, you don't see that kind of problem elsewhere. Why is...why are there uncertified teachers teaching in Detroit Public Schools?

**YP:** So, Teach for America, my understanding of the history is it was created to give students that were graduating from the hoity-toity schools, right, your cream-of-the-crop schools, opportunities to give back, so to speak. But, just because you have a degree in a certain area doesn't mean that you're trained and ready to teach it. You may have knowledge of it. You may be able to apply it to a job, but that doesn't mean you can teach it to somebody else because there's so much more that goes into that training to be able to teach somebody something. You can't just give them something because you're privileged. So, that opportunity, you only have to do it for two years, but we're not the PeaceCorp. These are children's lives. If you want to give back, go and bring water to a village. That's what you do for two years and leave. You don't go into a classroom, touch somebody's life, and then you're out of there and think it's not going to have a negative impact on them.

The whole purpose, in my opinion, of emergency management, shutting down public schools in Black and brown neighborhoods or poor neighborhoods--because these are the only people that are being impacted, people who don't have any option to send their children elsewhere--is to ultimately create generational service people who are in positions of just doing service jobs. You know, there used to be a time when McDonald's jobs that were had by teenagers. Every fast food place was full of teenagers, right? I was one of those teenagers. I had that job. Me and my friends fought over getting those jobs. We were so happy to get those jobs, but now you see people with families who have those same jobs, and which is why they're fighting for a raise to get 15 dollars an hour so that they can live. You can't pay a grown person nine dollars an hour and expect them to be able to take care of their families. That's ridiculous! And why do you think that's okay?

The people who make these decisions still get raises, don't have to pay back their student loans. I'm talking about the policymakers, right. People in Congress are voted in, and then once they get voted in, the corporations have these lobbyists

who pay them money to make the decision for them. The people are left out. But you want me to be okay with making nine dollars an hour to raise my family on, but you don't want to give up any of your benefits, not even a little bit of them? We're not saying cut everything, just don't get anymore raises. They won't even do that. Okay, so pay your student loans back? "Oh, no. We're not going to do that either." Okay, so then you shouldn't get benefits for life [laughs] when you leave. Nope. They're not giving that up either. Why not? You want me to do it. It doesn't matter to them. So if the people who are locally impacted don't start sticking together, technically we're all gonna lose because the local people are the ones who keep our society going. We're the ones who buy everything. We're the ones who invest in everything, and our level keeps everything going.

[1:00:43]

**PB:** Speaking of local people, I've been trying to, like, make sure in our conversation we're providing space to, like, really talk about Queen Mother [Helen] Moore and, like, how important she has been for decades here because people talk so much dirt about her in power struct--in, like, power systems in the city. So, can we spend some time talking about your relationship with her? How did you first meet Queen Mother Moore?

**YP:** So, sitting quietly in a room while I was yelling at Elizabeth Moje. The little weasel is a U of M star child. She's the golden child at U of M, does a lot of research on Black children, but she doesn't help black children. But, her research is on Black children. So, she's...she's one of the board members when my daughter was a student at DSA. And so, she's sitting there and she's going, "Well, we're coming to this meeting," and she's moving her hands more than she's talking. So, she's not saying anything and not making any sense, and we're trying to get an understanding of the budget. That was the topic of that meeting. So, she's telling us, "Well, I'm not sure where the budget or where it's coming from, but we're not going to be in control of it. Roy Roberts and the school, they're going to be in control of it." But, he's already told us that they're going to be in control of it.

So, we're trying to get answers from her. So, I'm like, "Hmm." So, I'm challenging her the whole time. Mother is sitting in the back of the room, watching me,



doesn't say anything. I hadn't met her yet, and she later just looked at me. She still didn't say anything. So at another meeting, we're at the Friends library, and I can't remember what we were there for that day, but I approached them, some of the members from Keep the Vote/No Takeover and the school board, LaMar [Lemmons] and Elena [Herrada], and I was asking them what could we do as parents to get U of M out of our school. Did we have opportunities or options? You know, what were our choices? And then, she talked to me later after that, and she started helping me from there because she saw a lot of herself in me. We both worked for the state. We both had children. We're single parents, and we both were strong advocates for our children 'cause that's where it starts.

If I didn't have children, I probably would have taken a different route because it would not have impacted me so hard, even though I fought as a student myself. I still did not do it to this intensity until my daughter was impacted. In high school was the real fight. Yes, we marched and got some schools open, got some principals back to their buildings, but not to the point where I asked to have a documentary made, I asked to tell the story. We were [laughs] on the news fighting to get the teacher's jobs back. I spoke at a lecture at U of M for their series to Detroit. So, they bring all these students from Ann Arbor [Michigan] here. So, I spoke there. That was on a panel.

Not to that level until my daughter was impacted, and I was so pissed off that how dare Doug Ross come here like we're stupid and we're not gonna research him? As soon as I knew he was coming, okay, who is Doug Ross? Who is he? Who is he connected with? What's his background? I had to find out who that is. You can't go address somebody and not know anything about them. It doesn't make any sense. How do you approach them? How do you ask them questions? So, that is what Mother Moore taught me. She enhanced everything that was already there for me and then took it to another level.

[1:04:59]

**PB:** What I'm hearing in that is--well, I'm hearing many things. One of the things I'm hearing is people who are most directly impacted by oppression should be the ones who are meeting and defining alternatives, right? So, with that--like, let's

take that as granted. People that maybe aren't as directly impacted, like, if you're giving them a message, what would that be in order...in terms of how to best support those who are the front lines and waging these fights?

**YP:** The message is what I have always told parents. Put as much as effort into this as much as you put into anything you care about because this is impacting you. You can't just drop your kid off and come pick your kid up, and then nothing's changing. If you want something to happen, don't come up here and complain about dress codes, not having enough programming, not having suitable teachers because the teachers didn't communicate with you. You have to come up here and get involved in everything. And, yes, you may miss a lot of days of work. Yes, you may have to come up here and get involved in things after work, but it's all worth it. It's all the way to change it. You have to be hands-on. You cannot be hands-off. You cannot afford to be.

[1:06:25]

**PB:** And, when you're having those conversations with parents--like, let's say for example a parent comes to you and says their issue is with the uniforms. Could you like walk us through--say we are parents. We're coming to you. "I'm really concerned about the uniforms." How do you relate that to a bigger, like, systemic critique? It, like, makes it clear it's not just about the uniforms.

**YP:** So, I help them understand that there are decisions being made outside of the school that we don't impact. I say, "In order for you to impact that, you have to take it beyond the principal. The principal was not the one making this decision. It was a district decision, and it came from the emergency managers." Right? In order to change that, you have to take it to the district. And, they don't want to do that. They want to deal with the person right at the kid's school, and that's all they want to deal with right there. But, most of the decisions are not made right there.

**PB:** And then, during emergency management, right, like, ...

**YP:** You couldn't even do that.

**PB:** ...it just keeps going up the chain.

**YP:** Yes.

**PB:** I remember--we talked to Elena Herrada, too, who explained to us what her experience was like as the [Detroit School] Board in exile.

**YP:** Yup.

[1:07:44]

**PB:** Did you have any interaction--I know you mentioned that you spoke with her and LaMar Lemmons. Like, what was that like in trying to work for changing the schools but when there was no lever of control?

**YP:** Elena is also a church member of mine. So, we go to the same church. But, how it impacted or affected me... I guess I could say they were very knowledgeable, and they knew where to give me information and answers. But when it came to them being able to follow through with some concerns, they got the same roadblocks that I got on purpose, but they're supposed to be the school board. So, how do you do that? Right? So, parents are coming to you trying to make a change, and you have to tell them, "Oh, well, we're sitting here having these meetings, but we can't make any decisions because when emergency managers are in place, they make all the decisions, and the financial review board makes all the decisions about the money." So, they can't make any decisions academically, curriculum, or money. Nothing. Nothing.

[1:08:58]

**PB:** So, I'm recognizing that we've talked a lot about the problems, but I also want to, like, frame it through the lens of like Keep the Vote. Could you talk about maybe like the first meeting you attended with Keep the Vote, if it sticks out? And then, kinda just like take us through your involvement or the history of Keep the Vote since you've been active.

**YP:** So, the first meeting I attended, they went over like the last meeting's--last minutes from the meeting before, and they had...there was an agenda. These are the important things that we're going to try to change right now. These are the fire or hot spot things we need to deal with immediately kind of thing. I wasn't too impressed at first [laughs], you know, 'cause it's kind of casual. But when you get to the meat and potatoes of it, what they're talking about and the actions that come behind it are what make the difference. So, yes, it's casual, it's laidback because you need a place of peace, of rest. So, this is like the re-grouping, the surge to recharge. You go in, and you plug in. That's that kind of thing.

So, you go in there, you're listening to other people, and they're saying, "Hey, Yolanda. I saw you," or "Here's some things you could do for the next time," or "Here's something. I heard that you were doing this." So, we're networking with each other--'cause remember, even though we're all in that group, there's still individual fights that we're belonging to outside of that. It's--how can I say?--very necessary to not stop our networking, our taking care of each other, our taking care of ourselves.

And, the Keep the Vote/No Takeover, they've morphed from one group to another. There used to be Black Parents--I believe Mother said--Black Parents, and then they morphed into Keep the Vote/No Takeover. So, even that has transitioned. I'm not the same person I was when my daughter was still in high school. I learned a different tact or tactful--tactical way to deal with stuff. Most of the time, I speak very softly. So, I make you have to be quiet [laughs] 'cause if you're gonna listen to what I'm saying, I'm not gonna yell over you. So, I speak very softly, and then I'm not seen as much of a threat and--till I finish my sentence, right? And then, you have to deal with me a different way. So--but I just cannot thank Mother enough for helping me to elevate my fight to where it needs to be and to take it beyond that 'cause I'm going further now.

[1:12:20]

**PB:** Who else is, like, regularly in the room for those meetings at Keep the Vote? And, this is Dexter-Elmhurst [Center], right? Usually.

**YP:** Usually, but they're trying to close that place. So, I'm not sure what that future is going to look like if they're not provided with some funding because the city has come and given them tickets for code violations. And, again, it all comes together, right? This is a displacement part. This group is so strong. This is all that we have, but, you know, take that from us because what we're doing is so powerful and impactful. That's how you know you're doing stuff that's right.

[1:13:07]

**PB:** I'm curious, like, from the coalition perspective--is that an accurate way to describe Keep the Vote?

**YP:** Hhmm.

**PB:** So, what...what... I guess, how would you describe the structure of the group? And then, I'm wondering about, like, how different individuals who are part of different organizations collaborate, or whether collaborating, that's on certain actions or what? Like, campaigns? Or, what that kind of cooperation looks like outside of the meeting spaces?

**YP:** We call on each other. We say, "Hey, we're having this. We need you to show up." That's it.

**PB:** So, did you have involvement with the Oakman struggle when Aliya Moore and them were waging that?

**YP:** That part I couldn't do. Yup, so me--I have a lot of health issues. I don't talk about them publicly, but it keeps me from doing things. So, I have to do what I can.

[1:14:21]

**PB:** Are there specific instances in which the organizing you--the organizing work you're doing like around DSA or elsewhere was very impactfully supported by Keep the Vote?

**YP:** Yes, especially when we were doing the board meetings and then they went public--they went private. They stopped having them publicly because they said we were so disruptive and rude to them. But, you're coming our place--you're coming in my home and kicking me out. You're coming in my home and limiting me. You're coming in my home and taking away things from me. And you think I'm gonna go quietly? Never. Not even a little bit. I'm not gonna play nice. You know, and people say, "Be politically correct." I am politically correct [laughs] for the person who's had power and is taken away from them, there is--they're not gonna give that power up easily. They're gonna fight you. They're gonna fight. And so, what makes you think I'm gonna be any different? I'm gonna fight.

[1:15:36]

**PB:** So, what does the next stage of this fight look like?

**YP:** [sigh] Depends on the outcome of the lawsuits, right? That's one. It's gonna depend on whether or not this read program, this Learn to Read [Let's Read?] program works for our third graders. That's another one. It's gonna depend on whether or not they give more of our schools away and close them 'cause we're

waiting now to hear if any school closures are gonna happen at the end of the year 'cause there are rumors. You know, we can't say one way or another what we know, but there are things that are going around. Principals are being laid off. Administrators are being laid off, but certain departments are growing. Why is that? Because that has no impact on the day-to-day. Why is this growing? What is this for? It has no impact on day-to-day. It doesn't impact curriculum. It doesn't impact programming. It doesn't impact anything. So, why is this growing? And why are you laying off all these people but telling them, "You better not say anything because we don't want this to come back and look bad on us?"

[1:16:58]

**PB:** Do you have any questions for Yolanda?

**OY:** No.

**PB:** I want to provide some space because Herbert's a DSA grad, and I'm wondering if there are questions that are coming to mind.

**Herbert Taylor [HT]:** I have a few things, but I'll ask one on camera. [laughs] So, me and my wife, we graduated from DSA in 2006.

[1:17:18]

[video cuts out]

**HT:** Our ninth grade year was 2002. So, you're familiar with who Mr. [Edward] Quick is, right?

**YP:** Yup.

**HT:** So, we were in his--the year before--yeah. So, the year we graduated, we performed at Carnegie Hall. And the following year, he retired, and I think Dr. Cotton either retired that same year or the year right after that, and just as an alumni for that school, a lot of us didn't know that stuff was even going on because things were happening so fast. And--so right now, I wouldn't be surprised if something were to just happen. [laughs] And as an alumnus, I guess, of any school area district they're calling the school district now, what would you suggest? Once we get this published, my former classmates are likely going to see this stuff.

[video resumes]

[1:17:18]

**HT:** So, if you can speak to other alumni of DSA or other high schools, what can we do to support the schools in Detroit?

**YP:** Right. So, alumni groups are very important, but unfortunately the alumni groups at DSA is very young. You know, the school hasn't been in existence for too long. You know, I'll give you an example of what I'm talking about. Cass has a very strong and powerful alumni group. They were able to prevent that horrible building from being torn down. It needed to be torn down. But, because of their strength and their unity. Most schools don't have that. So, not only do they not have the unity, they don't have the wherewithal on how to navigate and negotiate through these policymakers.

So, we contacted some alumni who did not reach out to the rest of the group because we didn't know--as parents, we don't know unless you knew parents of graduates before. The parents connect to each other, but we don't know the alumni. So, for the alumni, it would be beneficial for some of the alumni to be involved in the PTAs or whatever parents' groups are going to at school, and that's how you learn. That's where you get your information, connecting to the students.



You have to connect to the parents 'cause that's where the information comes from. The students--I mean, the school is supposed to tell you the information. They may not even let you in the door.

So, my last time actually being involved with DSA was in 2015. So, that's two years after my daughter graduated. And then, we didn't have enough parents that wanted to step up and do things because they want us to be politically correct. They want to play chess instead of checkers. And, I don't understand what that stupid term means, but people throw it around all the time. "Well, I'm playing chess instead of playing checkers." What? Kick the thing over! Throw it out the way and get to the point of it! What are you talking about? If the alumni wants to make changes, the parents are the way into the building. That's your connection. That's who you have to network with because you bring in information and knowledge from a different era.

So, maybe it wasn't happening when you were there 'cause you had you had the soldier there. Right? You had Dr. Cotton the protector. All those great things happened when she left. She left in 2010. That's when she grad--I mean, that's when she retired. So, in 2010 we got Rita Davis, who was a teacher. She became the principal. She was there for one year and then went to--then, when the University of Michigan came in, they got rid of her. Then, they made Ahna Felix-Brown, who was an English teacher, principal for one year. Then, they got rid of her and put in Miss [Delois] Spryszak. Was she there when you were there?

**HT:** I know the name.

**YP:** I think she was a counselor or some administration position.

**HT:** Oh, yeah. She was one of the newer counselors when I graduated.

**YP:** Uh-huh. So, she became the principal, and she was the principal when my daughter left. So, that's how many times it had changed since Dr. Cotton had been there in the short time my daughter was still there from ninth grade to twelfth

grade. When she was in the ninth grade, they had editing, they had photography, they had the music tech program. [laughs] They were doing the radio. They were doing all that stuff, you know, all those things. Orlando Bailey is one of the alumni we know.

But, some people have jobs now. They're working with these non-profits, and the non-profits are all in bed with all this kind of stuff to take over. They can't speak out. If they speak out and speak up, they lose their jobs, they lose their positions. So, their hands are tied. The only people who are not tied are who? The parents and the students. The movement comes from the parents and students. That's why you get students involved. The alumni who are not connected to nonprofits or any other entity that could be impacted, they will come, and they will be involved. But if they're connected, they're not going to have anything to do with it.

And then, because you guys are artists--you know this. Let's just be honest--you guys are looked at different, you know. What makes you work is different than a person that's this or that. My son is that person there is no grey area for him. My daughter is all over the place. She's an artist. She can take stuff, mold it, and create it. You know, my son is more creative in different ways. So, a school of DSA, they're creators. If they can't create stuff, they're feeling suffocated. You know, they're not in a good space. So, for you to go to that school and you take away my ability to create, what are you...what are you as a school producing? What is that graduate look like? 'Cause you just snuffed out my ability to create, when...who have I become? How do I fine tune my skills? My strengths? How do I do that? You can't, and that's the purpose. Then, they get this school of architecture or whatever they want at U of M, and it's walking distance from their administration building on the corner.

**HT:** Thank you for answering that.

**YP:** You're welcome.

**OY:** What role did the students play? We kinda talked about the role of the parents in these types of fights, but what role did the students play?

**YP:** So, the students--it's a little tricky because if you remember when the students at Southwestern [High School] and Western [High School] walked out and protested, they got kicked out. They were...they were held accountable for walking out of school and protesting and standing up. The students at King did the same thing, and they had the same accountability. So, yes, it's risky, but it's still something that needs to be done. And, the parents need to support their children in order to make this happen because if the students and the parents do not protest, do not fight, we're never going to see any changes, and they're going to keep shutting our schools down every year. They're gonna keep coming and taking our schools over.

[1:24:08]

**PB:** And then, what's the role of the--I guess we haven't talked about this--the role of the teachers and the teacher's union? I mean, that's a whole other can of worms.

**YP:** Yeah, that's a whole other can of worms. So, teachers mostly are used for information. I won't say your name, just tell me what's really going on. What did y'all talk about at the meeting, you know, when you had the meeting? Who were those people that were in the building yesterday 'cause they didn't come talk to the parents, the students? What's going on?' It was a teacher who informed us about the Ph.D. students walking around talking to the kids. We didn't sign any paperwork. You're not supposed to talk to my kid. You know, you're breaching your research stuff. You know, you're in a Ph.D. program, but you're interviewing children, but you're not getting the parent's permission? Who's signing off on this stuff? What are you using that information for? Even if you're just using it in a blurb, you're supposed to have my signature. So, how is that possible?

**PB:** Which kind of ties in to the deeper historical context, right?

**YP:** Right.

**PB:** Treating children as subjects.

**YP:** Right, or Black people period. You know, Miss Evers' Boys and all those other research nightmares you hear about. We don't count. We're not human yet. I don't know what it's going to take for me to be seen as human, but we're not there yet in the eyes of the law. How does a police officer in full garb say that he's afraid, she's afraid of somebody who's handcuffed? And, they get away with murder because they're killing somebody who's not human yet. Not seen as human. If I were seen as human, they wouldn't be able to do that in the first place. Somebody who shoots up a school, they can take them in handcuffs with no marks no bruises no nothing, but I can't even skip in the wrong neighborhood. "What are you doing here? What are you doing skipping? Why are you walking? Why are you driving through this neighborhood? Where are you going? Where are you coming from? Who's in the car with you? Everybody get out and get on the sidewalk. Put your face to the dirt. Everybody."

We're not human yet, and until we're seen as human in policies, in laws, it's not going to change. We have to do what we can at the local level to get a plain--a fair playing ground 'cause we're not getting that yet. But even though we don't have that, our children that finish are still succeeding. They are still succeeding and accomplishing things.

[1:27:04]

**PB:** Where do you see promising signs or signs of hope like towards--in this direction that you say we need to be going?

**YP:** So, I see signs of hope when I see our students graduating and doing good things. I see them in groups in schools where they say things are horrible, and there's all these horrible behaviors, but you still see groups of kids getting together helping each other pulling each other through. They're still doing this, even with all these things against them. They are still doing it, and that's in them. That's what these people fear that see us as not human. If we ever ever get to this point where we're all doing it, man.

[1:27:55]

**HT:** Why do you think there's such resistance for people that look like you and I to come together? Not necessarily resistance in our community, but resistance outside looking in like it's a threat. Why is it a threat for us to...

**YP:** Historically speaking, we've always been pitted against each other instead of to help each other, and what I mean by that is in the public's eye 'cause behind the scenes, we work together. We've had great neighborhoods. We've had things, and every time we create something, what happens? It's blown up. It's knocked down. We are displaced, and then they separate us. There's only a few over here, a few over there, a few over there. So in order for us to get together, we have to cross all these different counties, all these different neighborhoods. How does that happen? Right? Every time that we've tried to build something--look back in all of our history. Every other culture is able to build. There's little China, there's Mexicantown, Mexican Village, Mexican everything. African. Jamaican. Everything.

And, there's no investment. Buildings don't get funded, so how do you grow your business? How many fish markets can you have? [laughs] You know, how many braid places can you have? There's more to economic development than just those two avenues, hair and food and boutiques. And, they don't create enough wealth in our communities to keep them going. But when we had neighborhoods, doctors' offices, libraries, all of those things, they were bombed. They were knocked down. They were underfunded, and they could not last. So then, what do you do? You have to go get a job, or you have to do stuff off the books. So, you got the backyard mechanics with the little cigarettes dangling, but they could fix everything right? [laughs] And, you know, Mr. Brown around the corner, he would

tell ya what's wrong with the car, but he has no documentation. So, that's the other way.

That's why education is so important. Education is not saying that people who don't get it are stupid. It's a way to keep you from progressing. Because if I have mechanical skills but no mechanical license, I can't charge you what the mechanic charged you. So, if you tell me, "I'm only gonna pay you 20 dollars to do this," I gotta take it 'cause I need the money. But if I had that license, I could say, "Yeah, okay. You go to the next guy."

**HT:** Sorry. Keep going.

[1:31:03]

**YP:** So, killing education, it takes care of all of those things. So, if you stop me in K-12, I can't even get to the other points. And then, you took away my critical thinking. So now, I don't even have common sense. So now, everything has to be broken down for me.

**PB:** I think part of that, too, is like recognizing where each step in that intentional process people are profiting.

**YP:** Third grade's building prisons. Right? So, kindergarten programs don't teach you how to read. They're supposed to just teach socialization. But really, they're supposed to be the foundation for your whole education. When I was in kindergarten, I hated it, [laughs] but our teachers taught us. But, I was ready to learn more. You know, so I had a first grade teacher who taught us how to say the alphabet backwards. So, we knew how to say it backwards and forwards. And til I had my son, I could do it. But then once I had my son, it was like all my little knowledge of that just was gone. But, teachers who are truly invested, you see the difference in their students. You see how they interact with their teachers. You see the teachers involved. They're there early, and they meet the kids late. They do whatever they need to do to help those kids, but not every teacher is like that.

But, there's still a lot of them out there. I still have so much hope, which is why I continue to fight.

**PB:** And how could we best be supporting those teachers? 'Cause we know they don't get paid. [laughs]

**YP:** They don't get paid. So, do you need extra paper? Do you need sanitizer? You know, what do you need in your class to make it work? Or, do you need me to come in here and sit sometimes so you take a bathroom break? 'Cause, think about it, they only get a half an hour for lunch, 45 minutes for lunch. I don't know how they do it. [laughs] I have so much respect for teachers, you know, not just because a lot of people in my family were teachers, but because I know what it takes to give of yourself like that. That is a huge commitment, and when you hear people who have made something of themselves and they go, "I just want to say thank you to Miss so-and-so, my third grade teacher," how impactful that is, which is why I only put my children in schools where I feel like they get love 'cause love is so important to get strong academics. The academics will come 'cause I'm gonna give them what they need outside of it if they're not getting it in school. But, they gotta get love. If they're not getting love in that school, they're not gonna learn anyway.

[1:33:55]

**PB:** I'm a historian, so I'm always, like, looking for connections and ties, and I'm curious how people understand themselves in history. So like, Detroit has such a rich and powerful history of Black communities organizing educational justice and educational power. I'm thinking about Reverend [Albert] Cleage, Grace Lee Boggs, and Dan Aldridge and Dorothy Dewberry [Aldridge] and so many folks who have been doing it--Dr. [Gloria] House. How do you--like, do you feel a connection to that legacy and, like, do you draw strength from that? How does that play into your analysis of your work and what's going on in the city?

**YP:** Mainly, I just focus on what I know is real and how I can share that to--my experience has been if I can give people realistic current things to focus on...you

know, it's good to know the history, but how do I deal with this right now? And, maybe that's my experience dealing with people in so much trauma. You know, when you--I worked at a girls' home, and there were things I learned that they experienced that I had never thought could happen 'cause that wasn't my life or my experience. But when I heard those stories, I'm like, "How do you get the kid to learn that the parent is prostituting them? They still got to go to school. How do you get them turned on?" You have to deal with people where they are.

So, that's how I find my strength. I deal with people where they are. What are you dealing with? How is it that you get your kid to school every day? What's important to your family? If it's just important to the family for them to get through high school, then that's all they're focused on. So, you start right there. Okay, so what's next though? How do we look at what's next? "I don't know." Then, you have to talk to them about what's important. So, the history is not important to a person like that. So, you have to deal with people where they are. Don't come giving them your story, your history, your experience. No. I want to know about you. Tell me about you first. What do you deal with to get your kids here every day? Me and you can talk about other things in conversation, but if you don't understand where that person is coming from, the conversation is mute. Nobody's listening to each other. Everybody's just talking.

[1:36:47]

**PB:** Is there anything--I just want to do a time check. Five til three. Is there anything we missed that you want to make sure is on the record that we overlooked?

**YP:** The...the one thing that I want to talk about that I think we--I don't believe we hit on is how important it is for researchers who say they truly want to get the story to let the people tell the story. Yeah, they may go off on a tangent, [laughs] I mean, talk about all kind of stuff that you didn't want to hear, but you have to understand what they deal with everyday if you're trying to tell their story. You have to truly see it through their eyes. How does it feel when you used to be able to walk through your neighborhood and say hello to your neighbors without worrying about somebody calling the police on you because you're sitting on your



front porch? Or, you didn't cut your grass in two days, and somebody calls the police on you. You know, when your neighborhood is changing, the people are coming in from all these different places who are not seeing you as your other neighbor saw you, how does that impact you? Don't come here trying to tell my story through your eyes, through what you see. If you can't tell it the way I see it, then don't bother with it. Go research something else. Go take pictures of flowers, some rocks, 'cause they don't talk. Then, you can tell whatever story you want to. [laughs] Make it as beautiful or as ugly as you want to. But if you're dealing with people, deal with the people. That's it.

**PB:** Thank you.

**YP:** Thank you.