

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

Julia Putnam

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER

July 18, 2019

Detroit, MI

Narrator

Julia Putnam is a life-long Detroiter. In 1992 at age 16, she joined Detroit Summer, a Boggs Center program in which teenagers plant gardens, rehab homes, paint murals, and have conversations with older activists. During college, she was a Coordinator for Detroit Summer and a writer-in-residence for the InsideOut Literary Arts Magazine program, where she taught poetry to middle and high schoolers. She became a teacher and worked at Longfellow Middle School and University Preparatory Academy. With other educators, she founded the James and Grace Lee Boggs School, a K-8 school that uses the place-based education model. She is now the principal of the Boggs School.

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.

Abstract

Julia Putnam discusses her childhood, the pervasive sense of decline in Detroit in the 1980s and 1990s, the memories she heard from her elders about what the city used to be like, and the literature and music that defined her “eclectic identity” and what Blackness means to her. She talks about how she discovered Detroit Summer at 16, what the program was like, and what she learned from Jimmy and Grace Lee Boggs and the other adult coordinators of the program. Another major topic is why she became a teacher, her early teaching experiences, and her growing dissatisfaction with the traditional school system that caused her to join with other educators to try to found a new school. She talks about the long process of trying to create the Boggs School, their model of place-based education, anecdotes from the school, the importance of community, and the role of schools in creating communities.

Keywords

1967 Detroit rebellion; Black Panther Party; Charter schools; Detroit Public Schools; Detroit Summer; Detroit, Michigan; Education; Emergency management; Gentrification; Grace Lee Boggs; Henry Ford Hospital incinerator; James Lee Boggs; Paradise Valley; Place-based education; Teach for America; Urban gardening; Water shutoffs

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Transcript of interview conducted July 18, 2019 with:

Julia Putnam [JP]

Detroit, MI

By: Peter Blackmer [PB]

JP: My name is Julia Putnam. I live in Detroit, Michigan, and I'm affiliated with the James and Grace Lee Boggs School as a co-founder and a principal.

[0:00:18]

PB: Could you describe what your neighborhood and the city were like growing up in Detroit?

JP: I lived in a few neighborhoods, but working-class. Mostly, I guess formatively that I remember the most, at Eight Mile and Livernois. I remember it was where my great-grandmother lived, and she had this big yard in the back. We all called her Mother, and we would gather there for Mother's Day and barbeques and things like that, and that was where we would visit. But as Mother got older--my mom is a nurse, and we moved in with her so that my mom could care for her. And by that time, the neighborhood had begun to decline, elderly neighbors dying, moving away. And so, there was more blight coming as my great-grandmother was aging.

[0:01:24]

PB: Were there other major changes that you saw in the city over that span of time?

JP: So, I was born in [19]76. And so, I remember being, like, I don't know, 10, and I b... What I remember a lot are memories of my elders. Oh, this, you know, we used to go to Hudson's, or this place used to be something else. There was a pervasive feeling of decline of Detroit growing up, both that I could see in the neighborhood of my great-grandmother but also the way the adults around me talked about Detroit. The crack epidemic--epidemic was nothing that directly impacted me, but it was pervasive, I mean, this feeling of a lack of safety that people were going to. Don't wear nice things because you might get jacked for that. Don't be out at night by yourself. Like, things like that was kind of what I remember hearing growing up. But at the same token, I took the bus places by myself and always kind of had this sense that if you were street-smart and you walked like you had someplace to go, you were gonna be fine. And, I always was. Like, I never felt unsafe in Detroit, but there was a...a...a sense that I was supposed to.

[0:03:16]

PB: Do you recall those kind of observations impacting the way that you... Like, what kind of questions came to your mind during that time about, like, seeing these changes taking place in the city?

JP: I didn't understand why it was so hard for things to be better. Like, what does it take to rebuild a building? What does it take to fix swings in the park? I didn't have a sense of who was in charge of that and who was supposed to be doing it and why it wasn't getting done, but it just puzzled me that it wasn't getting done. It didn't seem like a hard thing. So, it was sad, and I know the message was you don't have to worry about that. Just leave. Like, your job is to go to school and get good grades so that you can go to nicer schools and be able to move out of the city. That was a very clear message that I understood. But, I also understood that I didn't want to leave because I liked Detroit--and I continue to like it.

[0:04:22]

PB: Are there any instances that you had or experiences that you had with racism growing up that kind of stayed with you that you'd be willing to talk about?

JP: I went to a really diverse middle school that--where most of the friends that I made there continue to be my friends. Burton International [Academy]. And so, not only was it--it was still majority-Black, but there were a good mix of like white kids and international kids and kids whose parents went to Wayne State or studied at Wayne State or... So I--however, I guess the feeling of racism that I felt more came from my own mom's grief of... [laughs] I can only think of like kids' parlance, but like just white people not letting us be great, you know like this is...

And her...like one time, my sister and I found a letter to Huey P. Newton from the Black Panthers. Like, I think we were like rummaging through stuff in the basement, and there's like this letter in my mom's handwriting, and it was like...and she was like, "Dear Mr. Newton, like I, you know, I really admire what you all are doing with the Black Panther breakfast program, but I really think you need to be careful about like, you know, this anger and like hatred towards white people. I think it's gonna like undercut your message." And my sister and I are like, "What? What's this about?" And my mom like swears, to this day, she's, "I'm not political. Oh, that's just, you know, something I was thinking about, you know, back when I was younger." I'm like, "No, that...this is political, this letter." And, you know, she always waved it off, and it...it...it came from a sense, I think... She lost a lot of friends in Vietnam and felt like Black men and Black people were doing well, and then this war was created in order to undermine that, and...and that kind of shuttered her down, like it doesn't matter what we do. And anything that my sister and I, who's also pretty politically minded, "What? Oh, you all are just so idealistic. You know, nothing's ever gonna work, but it's very sweet that you all are...that you care so much." But, it really comes from her caring so much and pretending like she didn't.

And, she also would talk about--her name is Patricia--and she would talk about going to high school and the white girls calling her Patty without permission, like just... So, there was this sense for my mom that like the government was corrupt

and white people are just disrespectful and...and her feeling cautious about like the white friends that I was making and her never being outright like, "You can't play with that person," or "That person's bad." It's just kind of like, "Be careful who your friends are." You know, like that kind of thing.

So yeah, just this sense of re--and I would read a lot, and history was a very good topic for me. So, I grew up like idolizing the Freedom Riders, like these kids who like were brave enough to like go down South and like do something. So, I understood racism in this country and how it worked and what people had done to address it, and that was something I spent a lot of time thinking about and admiring in other people and wanting for myself--or just wondering what I would do in those situations, but I...I can't say that I ever felt... Like, I don't have a story of anyone calling me the n-word or anything like that. Except going to college is really what did it. Like, a lot of my friends in Detroit who were white were like...they understood, I felt, what it was like to be me as a Black person in Detroit, and they were sensitive to that and empathetic to that and supportive of that and defensive of me. And, in college was when I first started to meet the people that were just kind of like, "Oh, but you're different." Or, the white people--this white guy that I worked with in the cafeteria who was just like, "You know, I don't want to hate Black people, but my sister got raped by these Black guys, so what am I supposed to do?" Like that kind of--where I was just kind of like, "Who? Who think...who...Alright." Like, it...it was so perplexing to me, but it was like, oh, this is...these are the people that [pause] my mom was talking about.

[0:09:41]

PB: So, what--[clears throat] this is jumping ahead--but what do racism and white supremacy look like in Detroit today?

JP: Blatant. [long pause] That's a hard question. [pause] Can I go back to that...

PB: Yeah.

JP: ...other question? Because I'm thinking also about this sense of the message I got that I was supposed to get good grades and leave Detroit. It meant that I cared a lot about scholarship, and there was a lot of you're acting white, you're talking white. So, I would get a lot of that. So, it was very confusing for me to grow up and navigate that. What did Blackness mean? What did it mean for me? How do I present it in a way that feels integrity with me, and how do I push back against people who have defined Blackness in a very narrow way?--in my judgment. So, I felt like I was navigating both sides. Combatting racism in terms of what Black people cannot be and then combatting this idea of what Black people have to be.

And so, [long pause] the reason that comes up for me is that when you ask about white supremacy, I...I think about gentrification that's happening in Detroit, and I think of this sense of... [long pause] There's a subset of white people in Detroit that I observe who seem to have this sense of like, "Finally, we get back what was ours and got taken away from us when we had to flee, when our parents had to flee. And now, we get to come back, and this gets to be our city again." And for me, that's what white supremacy looks like today. I also, though, see people who are like, "My parents made me feel so afraid of this place, and I want to engage with it really respectfully, honor what I missed out based on my...out of...because of my parents' fears, and how do I do that?" And then, some people wonder how to do it and never figure it out, and some people wonder how to do it and figure it out. And so, I just...it's... [long pause] Yeah, I don't know. It's all...it's all so complicated and all mixed up together that it's really hard. [pause] People don't smile and say hi. New people, new white people in the neighborhood walk by you and ignore you like they live in New York. That's what [laughs] white supremacy looks like to me in Detroit. I'm like, "Don't you know? Like, here we say hello." Like that's... [pause] And, it's troubling that you don't understand that, like how can you be here and not want to engage with the people who are...who are here. Yeah.

[0:13:29]

PB: I want to come back to something that you mentioned [coughs] within that response about how you were trying to kind of navigate your identity...

JP: Mmhm.

PB: ...and where...where were you drawing... Or, I guess, at what point did you feel that you were starting to move in a direction that was giving you some clarity about... [sudden jump in video] What was that process like for you?

JP: That's interesting. I don't know if I can point to a moment of clarity or even like a year of clar--maybe I can, and it might be when I was 16 and joined Detroit Summer because my identity has always been really eclectic. So, my mom--again, like, my mom pretends like she's not political, but like all of the Black authors were like on the shelf, so like I was reading like Langston Hughes and [sighs] Zora Neale Hurston before I knew that that was like part of like the Black American lit canon. It was just like on our shelves, and like all these short stories were really cool. So, I was exposed to a lot before I even understood that that was what many people, many Black people in their schools were missing 'cause I didn't need school for it 'cause it was right there in my house, and no one explicitly said, "You should know this literature." It just...I just knew it. So, that was always part of me. And then, I really liked biography, so I was reading about Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman and Mary McLeod-Bethune and...and admiring these people and therefore having a sense of like Blackness to me wor--was like regal. Like, you carried yourself like James Baldwin did or, you know. And...and so--but you also talked like James Baldwin did, which was not like, you know, street. And so, like for me, like that wasn't necessarily what Blackness was. It was another aspect of it.

I also liked really weird music for someone in my generation. Like, I'm not a hip-hop head like that...those were my older cousins who were like into Run DMC. And so, like it was peripheral to me, but I was listening to Stevie Wonder and Motown and Ray Charles and, you know, Sara Vaughan and Dinah Washington 'cause my uncle like was really into jazz. So, it's... So, that was also a sense of just like, "What are you listening to?" And I was like, "Ray Charles. Like, what are you doing?" And so, I had already had a really broad sense of what Blackness was just from growing up and what was around me and what I liked to do that was different from like the mainstream pop culture idea of what Blackness was. So, that was already my identity and to have people question it was confusing for me. It never shut that down. It was just like... And, I remember my really good friend Charmaine growing up, like my first best friend, one time said to me--and like

without any malice was like, “Why’d your mom name you a white name, Julia?” And I was like, “It was my great-grandmother’s name, who was Black.” Like--but it was, again, this sense of like you don’t fit this idea of what I think Blackness looks like. And, I also like country music, and I like... You know what I mean? [laughs] And I don’t pretend I don’t, and I don’t hide it. And so, I think, therefore, I was bumping up against people who were like--who were--who I was confusing.

And so when I got to Detroit Summer, I met more people who were interested in history, who admired the activists that I did, who even knew more weird, out-there stuff than I did. I remember one of the adults, Rich Feldman. The first time I heard Martin Luther King, Jr.’s I Have a Dream speech, like the whole...like just the whole speech as it was given--in D.C., not Detroit--it was on MLK Day. Rich Feldman had picked me up to go to a march with other Detroit Summer youth, and it was playing on NPR [National Public Radio], and I like never heard of NPR. I’m like, what is talk radio? Like why is...like, you get in the car, you listen to music. [laughs] You don’t listen to people talking. And then, like, you know, they play this speech, and I’m like, “Oh, wow. That’s interesting.” So, I got even weirder. [both laugh] But, I also found my people, and...and the...the definition of my identity got to expand because I saw other people who had a broader idea of like what Blackness was than like some of my peers.

[0:18:57]

PB: I want to ask more about Detroit Summer, but not before asking: what’s at the top of your playlist right now?

JP: I don’t have a playlist.

PB: [laughs]

JP: I still listen to CDs. [laughs]

PB: [laughs] What CD is...is currently in the drive?

JP: But, the CD I currently want to buy is Lizzo's, and my husband just got me Ray Charles singing country music for my birthday.

PB: Nice.

JP: So, those are--and Pink. Those are the three things that are currently in my...

PB: Nice. That's a great summer playlist.

JP: Thank you. Thank you.

[0:19:33]

PB: [laughs] So, how did you first find out about Detroit Summer?

JP: Jimmy and Grace [Lee Boggs] came to my high school, Renaissance, and they spoke in a classroom. I did not see them, but my friend Mary Trombley met me in the lunchroom and said, "I just had this presentation in class from this like Black guy and this Asian woman talking about this program I really think you'd like." So, she gave me the flyer, which was the call to Detroit Summer, and it was like [makes singing noise], like one of those moments where--because it said that Detroit was in crisis, that in every single social justice movement in this country, young people have made the biggest impact, and that Detroit needed young people today to like step up, redefine, re-spirit, and rebuild Detroit from the ground up, and this is a summer opportunity to do that. It was just like I want to rebuild, redefine, and re-spirit Detroit from the ground up! Like, who's that about? And so, I--apparently, the lore is I was the very first young person to actually sign up to volunteer for Detroit Summer.

[0:20:43]

PB: So, getting involved, what did it look like? So, you show--kind of just like put us there with you that first summer.

JP: I tell my mom I want to do this thing. She was like, "Okay." I take the bus all by myself to the opening ceremony. I had talked a couple of my other friends into it, said, "Hey, would you..."--including Mary Trombley--like, "We're...let's do this cool thing this summer." The opening ceremony is in the basement of the U.U. [Unitarian Universalist] Church on Forest and Cass, and I go in, and what I remember is this really beautiful, big Detroit Summer banner, colorful, and I remember the excitement of getting a folder and a reader, like this packet of like articles that like were relevant to the summer--like, so I'm that person who like loves readers. And Jimmy's there, and I--I'm sure other people spoke. All I remember is Jimmy and him saying that young people today want to get paid to go to the bathroom, and that's why I'm proud of you all for being here today to volunteer. We need you. We can't rely on corporations and the auto industry anymore to provide jobs, and therefore like what should we do with this city? I didn't grow up with a grandfather. I was like, this dude's proud of me. He's my guy.

And, all of the adults that summer were really impactful to me. I remember being really scared of Grace, really in love with Jimmy, and just blown away by what I was learning, what people were thinking about, re...realizing how much I was resentful of the suburbs, like people from the suburbs are gonna come help the city? Like, I thought they didn't care, you know. And so, like meeting young people my age from the suburbs who were like, no. We want to engage in this, too. Meeting college students from like, you know, I didn't know, from [University of California] Berkeley. I didn't, you know--or Amherst [College] or...and all those things, so it was like eye-opening that all these people were here, and I was learning to garden, and it was great.

[0:22:26]

PB: How many years in total were you involved with Detroit Summer?

JP: You never really leave Detroit Summer, ...

PB: Mm.

JP: ...so I would say since 1992, but I was a volunteer for about two or three years before I went to college. And then during the summers, I would come back, and they asked me to be a coordinator. So, I would come and recruit in high schools like Jimmy and Grace did, and I would also help to coordinate the programming.

PB: So, you mentioned the gardening and the farming. What other kind of programming was invol--was part of Detroit Summer?

JP: There were murals, and there was rehabbing of houses. Those were kind of the three main focuses.

[0:24:12]

PB: When you look back, what kind of growth did you see taking place in yourself or in your peers like through Detroit Summer?

JP: We thought of ourselves as people who could make a difference. I remember--so, the first year, we were doing this garden on...on Beniteau Street on the East Side, and it was for Mrs. Thomas. And at that point, people could request projects that Detroit Summer youth would do, and Mrs. Thomas requested a garden across the street from her, and she would make us lunch every day. I cannot stand green peas, [Peter laughs softly] but I...but I have never tasted green peas like Mrs. Thomas'. They were wonderful. Could be that we were gardening, it was hot, and I was hungry, but I don't think so, and I remember her saying one time during lunch, "You know, I used to be afraid of young people, but you all are

giving me hope that like young people really care.” And like, that was it. That’s all I needed. ‘Cause I didn’t realize that [pause] people were afraid of me, and I did not want that, and it seemed like a really easy fix. Garden? Okay, that’s...

It was fun. It was funny, like I remember there’s this guy Chris Shein who lived in California and was like totally tall and bearded and pale and had this like surfer dude accent, California accent. He was great, and...and one time, he bought the neighborhood kids some ice cream from the ice cream truck, [laughs] and one of the kids like said to Christopher like, you know, “Want a lick?” And Christopher was like, “Wow, thank you,” and goes [reaches out]...and the kid said, “Psych!,” which is like mimicking like this Eddie Murphy like comedy routine, and like we all died. Christopher was like, “What?” Like, so we had to explain it to him. So, it was just like this cross-cultural like thing that was just like really funny to be a part of, to...to know that like, again, intergenerationally, we were teaching Mrs. Thomas that young people wanted to make a difference. We’re teaching Christopher like don’t fall for that.

It was just in a really fun, easy way, and so I saw myself changing in terms of my agency. I realized and tell people now that like I don’t feel like my education started until that first year of Detroit Summer ‘cause it was like, again, I was learning about the conditions of Detroit. Oh, this is what blight is. Oh, this is systemic racism. Oh, this is like years and years of disinvestment in a place, and that’s why. It’s not the fault of Black people. It’s not the fault of like...it’s not because Black people can’t have nice things, like all these things I was hearing from elders that really came out of a sense of grief but not a political lens of like this is not us creating this. This has been by design. So, it also helped me...it took the weight off of me in terms of blaming myself, blaming my neighbors, but then also feeling like there’s something we can do about this and...and...and wanting to be a part of that. So, Grace says when she...the threat of A. Philip Randolph to do a March on Washington forcing [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt to integrate the armed forces made her think like, “Wow, if a movement can do that, like that’s what I want to do with my life.” And, I remember--and I hadn’t heard Grace say...this is...I’m making the connection now as an adult, but like I...I...I... If...if gardening can do this, then like, yeah, that’s...this is what I want to do.

[0:28:30]

PB: You raised it a couple times, like just that concept of intergenerational dialogue and...

JP: Mmhm.

PB: ...the power that had for you...

JP: Mmhm.

PB: ...over the course of Detroit Summer. Could you speak a little bit more about that and maybe like project in a larger sense like about like what the importance and power of intergenerational dialogue is within communities and for community-building and social transformation?

JP: I cannot stress it enough. I...it's so powerful to...a... Again, the transformation of Mrs. Thomas, there are young people I don't have to be afraid of. The transformation of me, there are elders who are proud of me already. I didn't do anything. I just showed up. So, that showing up is enough to help people, and then showing up and doing something also changes the perceptions of people. That was really powerful, knowing that like the little kids in the neighborhood while they were like making fun of Christopher and giving him a hard time also saw him show up every day and also saw him like, you know, be really proud to engage with them and like create this garden was impactful for like, I think, the little kids, and so...

And, one of the powerful things of Detroit Summer is we would have these intergenerational dialogues. So, there would be people who are long-time activists, and they would come, and they would tell their story, and then the young people would just interview and ask questions either based on the theme or just whatever came up for them. And so, the fact that the young people facilitated these conversations, not the adult coordinators of Detroit Summer, so it

was like this kind of like teenage conversation with an elder, and us learning from like their lives, and them learning from our questions or being challenged by our questions or simply just being in a space with us and laughing with us. There's something about that that I think brings us a joyfulness, a spirit, a lightness to elders, and brings a gravity to young people of like, oh, they need me. I need to show up in a powerful way. It's my turn. All of those things are really important. And when we talked with Grace about planning the school, she like begged us like make sure it's intergenerational.

[0:31:06]

PB: So, if you're looking back on Detroit Summer--maybe not so much looking back, but for reflecting on the impacts that Doi--Detroit Summer has had on the city, how do you assess those kind--the legacies and influence that it's had in the city today and particularly in like movement-building spaces?

JP: I was just talking to Jackie Victor from Avalon Bakery, like, we should make a web. Like, it's just...it's so...it's very hard to like find an activist in Detroit who cannot connect somehow to Jimmy and Grace. Like, it's just like this...they're like the Kevin Bacon [both laugh] of the six degrees of separation of activism in Detroit. Because... [pause] When Grace was alive and I was younger, I used to think that she was like really inflated, and I'd be like, "Okay, Grace, you're the reason urban gardening blew up in Detroit, whatever." But, she's right! And because... The highlighting of the Gardening Angels, as they were called, as I--like were a group of elders from the South who came and knew how to grow food and so would have these amazing gardens, and Gerald Hairston was working with the young people who built the gardens, created the gardens, in Detroit Summer. So, Gerald's like, you know, before you even like start digging, you need to go and like look at these gardens and talk to these elders. And so, we would do that. And then, we would go, and he's like, "It's not dirt, it's soil! There's a difference. You grow things in soil." You know, like, I'll never...like, I never call dirt 'dirt.' It's always soil--unless you really can't grow anything in it, then it's dirt. [Peter laughs softly] But, that started these conversations of like what do you do with this land, and I do think that that...like the urban gardening movement came from that.

I think that AMP [Allied Media Projects] and how they're thinking about digital technology and how to engage with it and how to become makers of media instead of consumers of media. I think about Jackie [Victor] and Ann [Perrault] and starting the bakery, and like Cass Corridor wouldn't be Midtown wouldn't be what it is without like them having like taken Jimmy's idea of like, no, like you create community and a neighborhood by like, you know, making bread and being with people. It's just...yeah. I don't know anyone who hasn't been influenced by Jimmy and Grace who are active in social justice work.

[0:33:58]

PB: For...maybe for younger organizers and activists that didn't have that direct kind of relationship...

JP: Mmhm.

PB: ...with Jimmy and Grace, ...

JP: Mmhm.

PB: ...what lessons do you think organ--like, young organizers today can be learning from Jimmy and Grace, that are particularly prescient in this moment in Detroit?

JP: [pause] That's a good question. [long pause] I'm trying to actually think about what I think Jimmy and Grace would say and not me. [pause] Or, what I watched them do that informs that question.

PB: You can answer however you want. It doesn't have to be in direct relation.

JP: Relationships. [slaps legs] Relationships. They built relationships. They read. They were always learning. [pause] They would talk to people on the street, ask questions, how are you doing. [pause] They would argue, and they would argue because you had to grapple with ideas. Like, you can't get stuck in where you are. And so, again, even as you're trying to answer one question, other questions are gonna come up. And so, you better keep asking yourself questions, and you better keep thinking about like, okay. Who would challenge this? [pause] Jimmy has this great quote that I love where he says, "We have to think about change not as something that we want to be different just because we don't like what's going on, but because what's going on is making us less and less human everyday."

I think this question of what it means to be a human being in this time is a really important question, and we can no longer take it for granted because I think I used to take basic morality and decency for granted, and then I look around and I'm like, "Oh, that's...that's not what we're doing anymore, [laughs] like just basically being decent to people?" I didn't even know that was a question, so obviously somehow it became one, and it is one. And so, to even use the word community and think that it means the same thing as like the person next to you is not right. And so, like asking people what does community mean to you? What does it mean to be a human being? What is the purpose of education, and why are you sending kids to school? Why do we...how do we use this technology that we have, and these innovations that are existing in the world? Like, I think we could just be living our lives trying to like be as comfortable as possible, and I think Jimmy and Grace would say like don't do that.

PB: Mm.

JP: It's...you're not meant to be comfortable. You're meant to like make things better, and that's not always comfortable.

[0:37:27]

PB: Since you...you're the one that raised the question, what does it mean to be human in Detroit today? I guess, at an aspirational level.

JP: Thank God. [laughs]

PB: [laughs] I'm not gonna ask you to just like, you know, to list out problems. But yeah, aspirationally.

JP: Yeah. [pause] One of the Detroit Summer elders said this, and I don't know who to attribute it to, but you got to give a damn. And, I think that's what it means to be a human being. You have... [jump cut] other than just yourself--and not even about other human beings, but non-human beings, about the earth, the planet. And, I think doing the best you can at all the times you can is what it means to be a human being, and I don't think that people push themselves to do the best they can as much as they should, but I also think that we can't always do the best we can. And so, we have to like have compassion for ourselves and each other when that's true and recognize that like sometimes we can't do the best we can because of real conditions that we've been put under and constraints that we've been put under that are based on decisions people made, but we can make different decisions. So, I think trying--*trying*--to be loving and sustaining is what it means to be a human being today, but I am still figuring that out.

[0:39:19]

PB: I think we all are, and I know that's a question that's usually a...a central one in meetings I've been to at the Boggs Center.

JP: Mmhm.

PB: It's a tough one.

JP: It's a great question.

PB: [laughs]

JP: I mean, I've been asked it since I was 16, so it...it never gets old!

PB: So, I want to move forward a little bit in your life story. Tell us how you first got...where your interest in education came from.

JP: People always told me I should be a teacher, which used to make me mad because I wanted to be a writer. And so, when I would say, "I want to be a writer," people would say, "Oh, you should teach!" So I'm like, I'm *not* teaching. So, I resisted it for a really long time, but becoming a coordinator for Detroit Summer made me realize that I loved working with young people, teenagers especially. I remember so viscerally what it was like to be an adolescent, both what was wonderful about it and what was challenging about it, and I love engaging with young people around their questions of becoming, and I thought marrying that love for adolescents with my love for literature...I thought being a teacher was the best way to marry those two passions. And so, I gave in and went to school to be a teacher, and I really like thinking about education, and I still have lots of questions about that, too. And so, again...and the same...it's never boring for me to think about what it means to be a human being, and it's never boring to me to think about what education means and how you do it well and responsibly. And so, that's how it got started.

[0:41:26]

PB: And where was your first teaching job?

JP: My first teaching job was...I think it was my--so, I count student teaching because it was...

PB: Mm.

JP: ...so impactful, not 'cause I was a good teacher, just 'cause I learned a lot, and that was in Longfellow Middle School. And then, while I was in ed school, I was a writer-in-residence for the InsideOut Literary Arts Magazine program. So, I taught poetry to middle school and high school kids. And after getting my certification, my first full-time classroom teaching job was at University Prep[aratory] Middle School.

[0:42:14]

PB: Can you talk a little bit about your experiences there? Like, what you learned and how you grew as a teacher and what your observations were?

JP: So, I'll start with Inside Out. This is really important, I think, to say that one of the things I learned from that is teachers engaging with their students on a human level is really important. And so, the program really encourages the writer-in-residence to come in but also encourage the teacher to write along with the students and share their work, and I remember working with this like older Jewish guy, Mr. [David] Wayntraub, and--in like Central High School, all Black kids and Mr. Wayntraub, who actually wore a yarmulke every day. And, I had never--he was like a kind teacher, like I never saw any kind of interactions that I thought were disrespectful or anything, but he was reserved, and I didn't know how well his students knew him, and he shared a poem at our...like, at the end of the semester and we're all kind of sharing out, and he shared a poem about his son that like had his students like, "Woah!" And, it was so beautiful to see him be vulnerable with his students and for them to feel like they knew him a little bit more, like I just saw their affection and respect for him deepen and grow, and it taught me a lot about what kind of teacher I wanted to be and what students connected to.

In Longfellow Middle School--Longfellow Middle School, I remember having--so, this is my student teaching. I've like never been in a classroom. I'm watching this teacher--I had a really great teacher, cooperating teacher. But, there was this group of girls that like, had they been in my middle school, would have been like

the total mean girls, and I would have been really afraid of them. And, I remember my tactic for dealing with them as an adult who wasn't that much older than them was to kind of like buddy up to them and be really--I want to say nice, but it was like more than nice. More than nice, less than sucking up. Don't know what the word is.

[0:44:50]

PB: Chummy? [laughs]

JP: Chummy! Chummy, yes, be very chummy with them. But then, I remember later in the semester, I had to tell them something to do...

PB: Mm.

JP: ...that like was out of my authority as the teacher in the classroom, and they were just like, nope. You have established yourself as our chum and our ally, and if you don't follow that and you become our person of authority, we're gonna challenge the hell out of it, so your bad.

PB: [laughs]

JP: I remember thinking, oh, that was my bad. I...I do have to establish myself as someone who is in charge, and not in a like I've got power over you, but like in a way that like when it's time to like do something here, you need to know that like we got to do something here. And so, it was...they were such a gift. It was just like, oh, I like did that all wrong. By the way, can I just plug that like that's exactly why TFA [Teach for America] is problematic because if you don't have experience, a long-term experience, in a classroom underneath a teacher watching you and telling you what you're doing wrong, it's really hard to be an effective teacher. Soapbox over.

PB: Go ahead. Like, get up on that soapbox. Talk about what TFA has done in Detroit.

JP: So, I can't speak to it 'cause I super ignore it, but I...

PB: Mmm.

JP: ...like know that when you have a program, and you have like a five-week kind of indoctrination sect--session, and it's really about managing the classroom, then you're not gonna be a great teacher, and... But, that doesn't mean that people who join TFA don't have the good bones to be a great teacher, and some of 'em figure it out, by hook or by crook, and that's impressive. But as an organization, it is not pre--preparing teachers well in my judgment.

PB: Mmhm.

[0:46:51]

JP: So anyway, [Peter laughs] I learned a lot from those early experiences. When I got to U Prep, University Prep Academy, I remember--I lived very close to it, like within walking distance, and there's a restaurant near it, and my husband was there, and he's a notorious eavesdropper, [Peter laughs] and he came home and said, "I heard these guys talking about this school, you know, and it sounds really interesting. It sounds like right up your alley." I'm like, "It's a charter school. I'm not working at a charter school. Like whatever, moving on." But, I kinda looked up the premise of it, and it was interesting. And so, I went with like all of the hubris and youthful nait...naivi--nave--what's the word? Naivete? Naivete. Thank you.--and said like, "I'm from Detroit. Convince me to work at a charter school." And the leader at the time was just like, "Well, it's small class sizes, no textbooks. We're going to opt out of the standardized tests. You will be like that aunt in every like working-class family who kind of like [air quotes] 'made it' and went to college, like you will be that model for our kids. It's gonna be like family. You're

gonna stay with them for three years.” And I’m like, check, check, check, check. Like, it was like, oh, okay. I’m convinced.

And for the first year or two, it was awesome, just like that. But then, it became like, well, opting out of the tests will be problematic. And I remember--like, I was so naive. I remember going like, I’m an organizer, like I...I...I could get every single parent in this like school to like opt out of the test. Like, just say the word. And it was like, well, then how are we gonna like prove that we are on par with like suburban schools? And it was like, again, like I didn’t have the political lens to understand like what was going on. I was still like, we’re trying to do something different, right? And, I will say that I have a much different attitude now that I run a school of like what constraints there are, so I would be less strident now, but I do remember feeling like there were like promises made that aren’t really being followed up with and excuses for why those promises aren’t being followed up with, and I’m starting to feel like this is not the place that was promised. [pause]

And so, I went to Grace. This doesn’t feel good, like I don’t--and there was particularly one kid who hated to read--*hated* to read--but wanted a gecko. [Peter laughs softly] And so, we did this whole project on how to take care of a gecko, which ones he should buy, what habitat it needed, how much it would cost, all of these things to convince his mom to get him a gecko, and it was also one of the projects he presented to the class. And, he read all the stuff he needed to do his project happily and gladly, and it got me thinking like, if there are people who just like informational texts and literature is not something--like fiction isn’t something that brings them joy, do they have to do it?

Like, I remember being in a re--like a reading class like as an educator student and getting into this argument with this guy--and not, I wasn’t even asserting this point. I was just asking a question. If someone like never reads a Shakespeare play or sees a Shakespeare play or does not care about Shakespeare, is their quality of life really that bad? [Peter laughs] I love Shakespeare. And this guy’s like, “What are you talking about? Like, of course their qual--like, everyone needs to like...” And I’m like, really? You seem really, really attached [both laugh] to like someone appreciating Shakespeare, and I’m not sure that that’s true. And...and this student made me think like I feel like a failure of a teacher, as a teacher because he doesn’t like to read, and is that really--and he feels like a failure as a reader

because he doesn't like to read the things I'm telling him he needs to read or needs to get better at reading, and he wasn't [air quotes] "on grade level." But, he could read well enough to convince his mom to get him a gecko 'cause he got that gecko.

PB: [laughs]

JP: It so just brought--again--brought up these questions for me of just kinda like, oh, what is education for? Why are we doing this? Am I being coercive in a way that feels okay to me? And, that's when I went to Grace. Like, so it was just like asking those questions. And she was like, "This is not you. This is the system. It's designed to coerce children to do this thing that the state says they should do, and you shouldn't feel alone. You should go talk to other educators who are feeling the same way." And that led me into the conversations that led to the Boggs School.

[0:52:33]

PB: Mmm. Before getting into the Boggs School, I want to ask a question about like the context of this period of time.

JP: Mmhm.

PB: Can you kind of give us a run-down of through your eyes during this period some of the impacts that the years of state takeover and emergency managers and DPS had in the city?

JP: Mmhm. So, I'm of the generation that was educated in DPS [Detroit Public Schools] schools and felt like I got a just fine education in DPS. I will say that I went to Renaissance [High School] when it was considered--I guess it's still considered--one of the elite high schools in the city. But, that's when there were like two. There were like Cass [Technical High School] and Renaissance. And, I learned really well how to get an A, which is why I say that my education started

when I joined Detroit Summer because I had lots of questions going into Renaissance. I was like really excited about those big thick textbooks. Like, you know, like all of the questions are gonna be answered, you know. Like, I cannot wait. And not many of my questions were answered, but I learned how to get an A, and I learned how to, you know. Like, I take a journalism class, and the assignments are to like outline each of the journalism textbook chapters to learn how to like outline texts as opposed to like have lots of texts? I don't know. I still don't get the point. And that's what we did. Like, but journalists ask questions! Like, are we gonna write articles? Like, you know, like was ready to be like, you know, doing an expose or something, or, you know, and it was just like, no, just write this essay. And I was like, I can write the essay or the outline, and I can get an A in outline writing, but that doesn't... So, that's what school was like for me. It was frustrating in that way, in that it wasn't as dynamic as I was hoping it would be. And so--sorry, how did I get on that?

[0:54:52]

PB: We were talking about the state intervention.

JP: So while I went to an elite school, I still felt as if I wasn't getting the education I wanted, but I got the kind of education that got me into college, that got me like the job that I wanted, and I did not feel like I had to go to a suburban school in order to get that. So... And when the emergency management and the takeover began, I was around people who were resisting it and saying that it was really bad, and I remember having to ask questions about that and why people were so upset. It wasn't immediately obvious to me, [long pause] and it also wasn't immediately obvious to me that like the Detroit Public Schools were so bad because even when they were great, I had critiques and...so why are they so...what...what's bad about them? Like, what's not happening? And, I remember that being defined as test scores declining and that became the argument for like why schools were bad, and I remember the argument of like parents just don't know that their schools are bad. Like, they are keeping their kids in these schools, but it's not because they're quality, it's because parents are too dumb to know that their kid--that they're sending their kids to bad schools. So, that narrative was always really problematic to me and kinda led me to ask questions of the people who were resisting it.

And, I also remember the charter school question coming up, which I can get to when we start talking about the Boggs School, but this idea that was compelling to me that I began to hear from people was this sense of disenfranchisement, this sense of like if there's an emergency manager, what about the people who are elected? And... But, I will admit that it was problematic for me because I still had this narrative from like my family of just kinda like, well, you know, Detroit's corrupt and like, you know, maybe we need to do...we need to have somebody come in and like, you know, make people take care of business.

So, again, I was really glad to have the activists in my life to be able to kind of put things in perspective, but I understood why [pause] Detroiters, the majority of Detroiters, didn't resist it because I understand this attitude of like [pause] the city's corrupt and city officials are corrupt. And somehow--[air quotes] "somehow"--schools are going downhill, and they used to be great, but they're not anymore, and again, they're blaming it on the Black people who are in charge as opposed to this questionable practices of the state and these bond issues and, you know, it's just like, oh, that's interesting. But, if you don't have anyone to like help frame these things, like in a broader picture, then it's really easy to fall for the narrative that Detroiters just don't know what they're doing. I was lucky enough to have people who could like challenge that narrative.

[0:58:42]

PB: So, we know, obviously, during this period of emergency management and state oversight that there's massive school closings. Could you talk a little bit about how school closures impacted your communities?

JP: I didn't understand how school closures impacted the community until I became a school leader because I didn't understand how much schools were part of neighborhoods. So, I--Burton [International Academy], the school that I went to, wasn't in my neighborhood, so I had to drive to it, so it was not--but I remember walking to my neighborhood school in elementary school, and as I think back on it, when I was...when I was nine, Tracy Epperson punched me in the

eye because she was mean to me because I liked summer school and she had to be there. Whatever. [Peter laughs softly] The important part of that story is that there was some--I was like in fourth grade or something. There was an eighth grader who was walking home too and saw this confrontation happening and telling Tracy Epperson and her friends to leave me alone and then walking me home. Tracy lived on that side of the street [points to her left], and she walked home that way, and this eighth grader walked me all the way to my house like two blocks down. [points ahead] And, I think about like that a lot. I mean, I don't know that eighth grader. Couldn't pick her out on the street. But, I do think of if I didn't walk to school, if I wasn't so easily accessible to my mom, if that...you know, like... It's just, if I were standing at a bus stop, would somebody have been able to come and intervene and then make sure that I got home?

Like, schools as like a place in the neighborhood I think are really important, and I think when you don't have them, it puts a burden on families to have to have transportation or to leave their kids alone at the bus stop. I think when a school is not part of the neighborhood, there's less of a neighborhood identity. If the school wants to engage with the community around it, it's really hard if like the kids like scatter at the end of the day. It...it just puts so much burden on families when schools aren't part of a neighborhood structure or community structure. And so, I see the impact of that. I also see this really condescending attitude towards parents, right. Like, this school has to close because it's no good, and you just don't understand that, like parents can't define for themselves what a good school is for their kid. But then, it also brings up the question of space and who lives in the city and who's staying in the city and who's leaving in the city and how you reimagine spaces, how you share spaces. Like all those questions come up, but instead of like grappling with those real questions, it's just closing. That's the easiest solution.

So again, the grief that I felt my grandmother having about like all of these businesses and...and Paradise Valley being gone and like not being able to drive by the nightclub where she saw Billy Exton (??) and--you know, this kind of grief, it...it just becomes more. Like, this used to be my school. This used to be the building where like I learned how to do whatever. This is where I had these really formative relationships. When that goes away, it's really hard to become a unified city. It's really hard to have an identity. It's kinda like--this will be funny. It's hard for me to root--like, I'm a...I'm a homer. I love Detroit. I'm gonna root for like my home

teams, but it's really hard to do that when like your guy can get traded. Like, your favorite player is like now like in this like trade deal, and the reason I go to like these games or the reason I root on these--this team can be gone away anytime. Like, how do you become embedded? Like, how do you own this as yours if it keeps going away? It's the same...Like, you know. This is, you know... Like, I went to like Northern High School or I went to East--you know, like, that's important like for people's like identity, and...and I just don't think that it feels the same. [pause] That's how I see it impacting.

But, there are also... Not only with the closures, but before that, there was the dropout rate that everyone was really concerned about, and I remember Grace saying that young people aren't dropping out. They're voting with their feet because this is not meaningful to them. This experience is not relevant to their lives, and kids know that. And so, it's not that they're failures. They're choosing to say this is not working for me, which I think also impacted enrollment, which also impacted funding, which impacted school closings. So, if we don't answer the question of what education is for and help give families and children a purpose for being in a school institution, then this is just gonna continue, and it doesn't have to.

[1:04:34]

PB: And how have charters figured into that process? I know that's a complicated question.

JP: I know. We call ourselves charter school leaders who don't believe in charter schools. [Peter laughs] It's a real question for us. So when we were planning the school or talking about starting the school, we couldn't see a way to become like part of the DPS system and do the model that we wanted. We didn't think--we didn't want to be an independent school because we thought that we would... We didn't want to charge tuition, and we thought if we didn't charge tuition, then our lives would not be as educators, they would be as like fundraisers, and so we didn't want that. And so, the charter system seemed to be the only way, and we got lots of pushback from people who cared about us tremendously and said, "Please reconsider. Don't do this. You're legitimizing a system that is delegitimizing

public schools.” And while we understood that, we also knew that if we didn’t have a model of something different to show, then we couldn’t join the conversation, or it couldn’t influence the conversation.

And, I remember sitting with Shea Howell one time and saying, well, you’re a community-based charter school as opposed to a corporate charter school, and that was the language we needed to kind of brand ourselves and distinguish ourselves for not like...we’re not here to profit off of kids, and we’re not here to join this like corporate model, like make Boggs schools like, you know, all around the city and around the world and...but we want to be like this one community school that serves a neighborhood, that anchors it, and that helps kids feel a sense of place and ownership, knowing that you preserve what you love, right. And so, how do you help kids fall in love with their place in order to preserve place?

[1:06:44]

PB: Mhm. So, I know that [clears throat] the charter question is only one part of this broader process of founding the school. So, could you walk us through what that process was like? And, I know it was lengthy...

JP: Of becoming a charter school?

PB: No, just of building the school itself.

JP: [sighs]

PB: You can give us the Spark Notes if you want. [laughs]

JP: It was a painful process. It started with six people. Three people were left at the end--three women. I find that noteworthy. We were very idealistic, went in thinking that like we’ll give ourselves three years. It took five. Thinking that finding

a space in the city would be the easiest part. It was the hardest because of school code, because of fire code, because of so much damage had been done to so many buildings that had been left unsecured and uncared for by the city, uncared for by DPS through emergency management. [Jump cut]

Many times where we thought like we don't know if this can happen. People will say like, "Oh, this is so great! You're starting a school? When is it gonna open?" We didn't know. "Oh, that's so great, you're starting a school. Where is it gonna be?" Didn't know. Like, it was just like we're... [laughs] We're gonna fall on our faces in a very public way. And also, when we were planning the school, we had gone to see models--we got a little planning grant from the state when they were still giving planning grants, but so many people had received the plan--the state wasted so much money, I think. So many people were given planning grants for chart--to start charter schools, and then the charter schools never opened, but the state didn't like ask for the money back or...it was just gone. So, I think they got rid of the planning grant for a while, and I think they just reinstated it. I'm not sure. But, we used it wisely, and it was like planning and implementation. So planning, we like just kind of like went to see different models of schools, picked the brain of other educators that we respected, really kind of taught ourselves to be school leaders.

And then with the planning grant, we hired Amanda [Rosman], who's now the Executive Director, to...to help plan full-time because we were all teaching. I was at, actually, just had my first child, and so I was at home with him when we started this, and I remember Nate Walker first had the idea of like pulling us together to have [air quotes] "discussions" about education. I thought, "Okay, I'm home with my baby, but I like talking about education, so I'll go." And then realizing, "Oh man, Nate knows what he's talking about. Like, we could actually pull this off. So, I guess I'm on the team now." And so, Amanda quits her job as a full-time teacher to now become the full-time coordinator for this project of starting this school.

We had to apply to multiple authorizers to have them pick us up. And, I think what's important to know about that time is that when we were planning a school, there was a cap on charter schools, so there could only be like a hundred or something in the state. And so, when you applied to authorizers, they either like had schools that they could open or not because they only had a limited

number of charters to offer, and we weren't really competitive because we wanted to start really small, and we met with one consultant who was just like, "Well, you can't start with less than 350 kids! Like, you'll never be financially stable." We're like, "350 kids? You can't build the kind of culture we're trying to build when you start with 350 kids." Like, for me, if you don't know the name of every kid, and you don't know the name of everybody's mama and grandmama, then like you are...the school's too big, and that--350 was way too much. And so--but it also helped us understand the way that like other schools were thinking about themselves and thinking about financial stability. And so, not only were we gonna start too small, but we also had this weird like place-based model that no one had ever heard of. So, it was very hard for us to like get in the doors as like really small mom-and-pop school.

So, I forget what year it was, 2010 maybe, is when the vote came to lift the cap on charters, and we were really conflicted because we knew it was a bad idea for the state, but we knew it'd be really good for us in terms of our chances of opening because we weren't making any headway. That was really hard, and the charter cap got lifted. And by that time, Nate had left the project and two others had left the project, just because it just...it doesn't...he was like, "I don't think it's gonna happen. I don't think this is gonna work." And, the rest of us weren't ready to give up, and there was also a call on one partner's end to like just pause it for a year. You know, like just retire, let's catch our breath, and pick it up again. But, I knew that like we were so tired, if we put this project down, we're not--I'm not picking it up again. And so, I thought like we...we just got to keep going. And, I remember telling the team I heard a midwife say one time, "I know the baby's about to be born when the mom says, 'I can't do this.'" And so, that quote really got [laughs] us through a lot of nights.

And so, the cap gets lifted. EMU [Eastern Michigan University] calls us back, who had been the most promising kind of authorizer, and said, "We have a charter to give. Are you down?" And that helped--so, the Southeastern [Southeast] Michigan Stewardship Coalition was a coalition of schools doing place-based education and learning that model, and Ethan Lowenstein was a professor at EMU and also directing SEMIS, that...that coalition, and he's the one who got us the meeting in with the dean and with the charter school. We call him--we call him our midwife. [Peter laughs softly] And so, we're really...a lot of charter schools have antagonistic relationships with their authorizer. We love the Charter Schools Office

at EMU because they were willing to take a chance on us, because they recognized what we were trying to do and recognized this importance for kids, and they have been supportive. They don't micromanage us. They, you know, encourage and support as opposed to like, you know, looking for ways to critique and...and shut us down. So, that's been really great. But that was five long years...

PB: Mm.

JP: ...of not knowing if we were gonna pull it off or not.

[1:14:28]

PB: So what was the first day like?

JP: Oh, man... It's... So, first of all, I have to say, it still feels surreal, and we're about to start our seventh year. Like, I still kinda can't believe it. But, the first day--so, in the midst of like getting... So, we get the charter, but we still think that we might get delayed a year because we can't find a building, and when we finally did find a building very serendipitously, we had seven weeks to renovate the building and get it ready for kids. And as a matter of fact, on the first day of school, we like... The first day of school, we hadn't had our certificate of occupancy. So like, Amanda, the Executive Director, is on the phone with the state saying like, "Do we have our C.O.? Can we open the doors?" We thought we might have to like camp outside or have like outdoor classroom for the first week or something like that, so like that's how to the wire it was.

So, it was really stressful to like get to that point, and we also had space for 64 students, and we had 30 students on the first day. So, how are we gonna meet this budget? Like, we were like going to the supermarket like, you know, you got a school? You're at our school now! [laughs] Which also meant that the school doubled in the first year. So like, teachers would like have their first, you know, like acclimate their kids and like here's who we are as a community, and then like, ope,

we got a new student, and ope, you know, we got a new student. So like, it was a hard year in terms of that.

But, the first day was exhausted people like lined up. Like, all of the people that helped renovate the school, the board, the teachers, and like the kids are coming through the door, and we're like standing there like staring at them. Like, we freaked so many kids out [laughs] 'cause they're like, what? Like, who are these people? It was so beautiful to see their faces, though. Just like, it just happened, like this is *the school*. Yeah, it was surreal. It was cool.

[1:16:37]

PB: Mm. I want to come back to place--get like, digging into what place-based education means, ...

JP: Mmhm.

PB: ...just so it's on the record. Can you give us kind of just a working definition of place-based education and then an illustration of what that looks like at the Boggs School?

JP: So, place-based education is learning that's rooted in the local. So, you take the state content standards, and you embed them in the study of the geography, history, culture of the neighborhood or the place that the school is in, and kinda the three tenets are, you know, student inquiry, connection to place, and some sort of civic action, which doesn't necessarily mean like a city council meeting, but this idea that like your learning...the audience for your learning is not just the classroom. So, how can you take what you've learned and like help other people from that learning? And they're...it's continuo--continuing to define itself and to grow and shape itself in terms of the way it plays out at the Boggs School.

But, like I said, like this is the first time like we've sat down as a staff and had like a comprehensive like writing of curriculum before the school year starts, which is a very exciting place to be in, but some examples are we have one room that's notoriously small, and the standard for that year--I think it was a fourth grade class--is measurement. And so, the teacher taught the kids how to measure the room and make small-scale models, and then she had a competition and groups of kids to come up with like the best way to place the classroom like to furnish the classroom that like maximized the amount of like space in the room. So, you gotta learn measurement, but how do you use it to like impact this place that we're in?

The first and second grade teacher did a unit called Meet the Neighbors. And so during the summer, she vetted like neighbors who lived in...around the school, and in order to teach summary skills and interview skills and questioning skills, she helped the kids learn, like come up with these great like juicy questions, and then they went and they interviewed some neighbors on...on their porches to get their like story and how long they'd been in the neighborhood. And then, the culminating thing was them writing like Pokémon trading cards but with like their facts about their neighbors which they could share. So like if you don't know the person that's three doors down from you, here's their card, that's Miss Hazel, you know. So, that's another example.

The middle school has studied the water shutoffs. We have talked about the fiftieth anniversary of the Detroit rebellion. There was a debate about whether or not to call it a rebellion or a riot with very interesting results from kids. It was very different opinions about that. They have gone on the Detroit River on a Sea Grant boat to like test water quality. There's lots of ways to be in our place.

One teacher taught tally marks to her younger kids by like going around and counting the broken windows in the neighborhood and come up with ideas about like what we could do about them or some suggestions or who we might write a letter to. So, those are some examples of place-based education.

[1:20:33]

PB: This is probably already very clear, but for the sake of, you know, being thorough, could you talk about the connections to the... It seems just like a logical outgrowth--place-based education--of this broader ethos and...and political analysis around grassroots organizing and now with emergent strategy. So, could you talk about that connection and maybe its like relation to the work that the Boggs Center does?

JP: Mmhm. I think that if the work of the Boggs Center is to nurture community leadership and to think about creating what is new and visioning what could be, I think engaging young people in this idea of education as something that is in service to the community is really important to push back against the narrative of school as a means for upward mob--individual upward mobility, but the means of school to rebuild our communities. If kids are in school for 12 years or however many long they are required to be there, then why isn't the learning that they're doing impacting the community around them for the better? And so, I see that's how...that's how we came to place-based education. Like, our mission was... First, it was to nurture creative critical thinkers who contribute to the well-being in their communities. Our idea being that in order to do something different, we have to be creative. In order to do something different, we have to think critically about the systems that exist and how they might be different, but you can be a creative critical thinker and like rip people off on Wall Street. But like, the idea then is to also contribute to the well-being of your communities, what...whatever those might be.

And so in order to do that, we must feel connected to our place, and kids must feel as if their energy and their learning can impact the place that they're in. And, there's also they're practicing to be citizens. To expect that we have kids being in school for eighteen years and then like they come out and they're able to vote, but they've never practiced democracy, they've never practiced freedom, they've never practiced civic engagement. Then how do they know how to do that well so that they contribute to our democracy in a relevant and powerful way? So, tha...that...that's how we see ourselves kind of playing into this.

And, I also want to be very clear that I don't... It's a really messy process when you tell parents this, too. Like one, a friend of ours kind of advised us as we were planning like, do not tell your parents that you're creating this perfect, shiny thing

that you're placing at their feet to enjoy. Like, you are creating a process that they are involved in, and it's gonna be messy, and it's gonna be hard, and it's gonna be beautiful and wonderful, and all of us are gonna be better for having engaged in this process. And, I also see the Boggs School as not the end. Like, I feel like we are...we still are complicit in a lot of practices that I think... [pause] I'd prefer not to have, like mandatory standards, for instance, standardized testing, for instance. So, I don't think we're like everyone should do it exactly like the Boggs School 'cause we're getting everything right. I feel like we're the bridge between what is and what could be, and so I also like am very careful about that as well. Like, someone's gonna take what we're doing and like take it to a whole other level, and if that's a Boggs kid, so much for the better.

[1:24:35]

PB: On that note, something that I've been wanting to ask you is like I know in my experience as a teacher, some of the things that have sustained me and that I look back on are those...those stories that you have, those experiences with particular students where it's like this is why I do it.

JP: Mmhm.

PB: Are there like one or two of those that stay in the front of your mind that you think like really indicate what the Boggs School is about?

JP: There are too many!

PB: It's a great problem to have! [laughs]

JP: It is a good problem to have! It's...it's wonderful. We have this phrase, the admin team, the co-founders. We're just like, "Oh, that's gotta go in the book."

PB: [laughs]

JP: Like, we have these like folders that like... You know, like a really funny story that we're gonna wish we remembered. We try really hard to like just jot those down so like when we're reflecting like in retirement, we can look back and oh, remember that time? So, one story in the first year, I remember a mom calling us and saying, "Is so-and-so there?" Like, her student. And we're like, "Yeah, he's in school." And she's like, "[sigh] He's sick, and he was not supposed to go to school, and he totally snuck out with his siblings 'cause he did not want to miss a day at the Boggs School!" Like, it was just like so funny [laughs] that this kid just refuses to stay home even when they don't feel good, and I think that was one moment in our first year we're like ohh, we're...we're doing something for...something's going right here. It was very funny.

PB: [laughs]

JP: When our--so, we just graduated our second group of eighth graders, and in our first group, there was a girl Komari (??) who had been with us like from the beginning. So, we started K[indergarten] through four, and she was in fourth grade her first year. So, she's graduating. It's our first cohort, and she says--and, you know, we don't do that valedictorian stuff--but she said, "I gotta speak. Like, I've been here the longest, and I need to talk to my class." Like, okay. So, she gives a speech, and like it still like chokes me up, but because what she said is, "None of us want to leave. Like, we would go to Boggs College if we could, but what we've learned here is that you have to change. It's important, even if you don't like it, and we're gonna be better for wherever we go, even though it's gonna be hard. That change is inevitable and important for your growth." And this is like a fourteen-year-old just mirroring back what Grace has been teaching us forever. And it was like, oh, they're...they're getting it.

And, the same is true for...for this year. Two kids who had been there in third grade just graduated, and they're like really close and had been from the beginning, and they both decided that they needed to give a speech and talk to their peers and...and one of th--they both got into Cass [Technical High School], but Arielle (??) didn't get in at first and was really...felt really defeated by it. And,

she's one of those people who [pause] will speak her truth even when it's hard, and not in an obnoxious way. She's just brave. And, we encouraged her to appeal. Our counselor like worked with her on her essay and everything. And so, her whole speech was about like, "I came to this school. I was one of the kids who was in the office a lot, and then I got really quiet and really decided who I wanted to be. And then, I thought I wasn't gonna be able to like realize this dream at Cass, but like I was encouraged not to give up. I didn't give up on myself." And, you know, and she had dates like, "On this May whatever, I got the rejection letter, and then I worked on it. And then on like June fifth, I learned I actually won my appeal and got into Cass." Like, it was just so powerfully laid out and so like I am empowered. And, this is a kid who [pause] shouldn't be empowered, and I don't mean that in that she doesn't have the right to be, but in many situations would not have realized that and not have been told that, and she just owns it.

Like, the...the best and worst thing about Boggs kids is they believe their voice is important [laughs]. They think it's valid, and I think while that as an adult and as an administrator and as a leader that can get really--and as a parent--that can get really, really tiresome and difficult to deal with, but as someone who understands the need for young people, and the need for young Black people, and the need for young Black Detroiters to know that their voice is important, we welcome it. And, they're around adults who say like, yes, your voice is important. Here's how you use it responsibly. Here's when you might choose to use it. Here's a battle you might want to pick, and here's a battle you might not want to, but when you're ready, you've got it, and you feel entitled to it, and that is really powerful to see.

One more, and that is the incinerator just closed, and there is a first and second grader, or kid in the first and second grade class, and the teacher overheard like, just like a table discussion, and they were saying, "Yeah, I wonder... I could like borrow my dad's sledge hammer, and I bet like if we go in our costumes like we could go, and we could just like tear it down in the middle of the night." And, they realized that they were talking about--the teacher realized they were talking about the incinerator, and this one particular kid, his parents are like super activists around the environment, and like he was hatching this whole plot with his friends to go and like destroy the incinerator in the middle of the night in their costumes. And, out of that conversation came like, oh, I guess we should talk about like the incinerator and air quality and see where this goes.

And, we worked with the organization People in Education, and an artist came out, and they did this whole year on like what...where trash goes, what to do with it, what does recycling do, and they made this movie called--oh my goodness, I'm blanking on the name of the movie--Trash Life, and it is the most hilarious thing you'll ever see, but it also is like so well-informed, you know. Like all of the learning that they did you can totally see in this film, but through the lens of like...like second and third graders. It is a delight, and I think--and so, when the incinerator closed, I went to that kid who kinda started this whole thing. I was just like, you're magic! Like, you did it! Like, are you kidding? Like, you know, you didn't even have to do it with a sledge hammer! [both laugh] So, it's like that of...that kid's sense of like, "See?" is pretty cool.

[1:32:46]

PB: [clears throat] I have one other question I want to ask, and I feel like I could sit here and talk to you about this all night, and I really enjoyed that, so I hope we can like keep talking about this...

JP: No, this has been great. No, thank you.

PB: What's your vision for the future of Detroit--or beyond--that guides the work that you do?

JP: What's my vision...

PB: For the future of Detroit, or...

JP: What was the part before it, the work that I do?

PB: So, what's your vision for the future of Detroit that guides the work that you do?

JP: That guides the work that I do. [long pause] My vision for the future of Detroit is that it is a place unlike any other city, and that we're not trying to define ourselves in relation to the way other cities do things, that we're okay with not being dense like New York City, that we embrace who we are, and that we are led by young people who have grown up making a difference in their city through building community, and that we come up with our own ways to thrive that haven't been thought of before.

PB: Thank you.

JP: Thank you.

[1:34:27]

PB: Does anybody else have anything that they would like to ask?

Herbert Taylor [HT]: I do, but...

JP: You can ask me, I'm curious! I want to know.

HT: You may have touched on this when I stepped away, but what is...what is the importance of community? How would you de...define that? Wh...what is community and...

JP: We die without it. [pause] Jimmy would say, when people would applaud him and Grace, "Thank you, but don't think that Grace and I are up here by ourselves. It is only in relation to other somebodies that anybody is somebody," and for me

that's what community means. Like I...I represent the Boggs School, but in no means would it exist without twenty years of relationships with people, without the generosity and grace and hope of other people, of the desire of people to be in community. Like, I think so much of...

So, another story. There's a...there's a parent at our school who, she...she wouldn't mind me saying, is rough. From a rough neighborhood, had a rough life, been through rough things, and used to fighting all the time, fighting administrations at her kid's schools. I remember her one time coming in and just being like really rude with the administrative...the office administrator--who by the way is Dorothy Aldridge's daughter. And I said, "Oh, we don't do that here. Like, you know, let's...let's work it out." And so, that's just kind of been the way I engage with her. And one time she came in, and she said, "Miss Julie, I have to tell you. Like, I was having a problem"--with the kid she has at another school--"and they were being bullied, and me and some other parents were gonna go beat them up."--the kids. And she said, "But, I just thought maybe we should just go talk to the principal 'cause that's how you all would do it at the Boggs School." And she said, "And, all the other parents were like, 'What? Why would we do that?'" [laughs] And she said, "But, we did it! I convinced them to do it. We went and talked to the principal." And, the principal I guess changed something, like changed the exit or entrance of the kids who were having the problems, and it all worked out.

And she said, "They thought I was crazy, but I was like, nope, that's how we do it at the Boggs School 'cause that, you know, that's how we all do it. And when I was driving to school that day and my kids were like, 'We're not getting out the car? I thought we were about to do something!'" [laughs] And so, and she also said at like her last meeting with like myself and another teacher, she said, "You all have taught me so much about parenting 'cause I used to think every time my kids got in trouble, I would think it was the school. And now I realize like, oh, it was them, and it was me, and it was how I was asking them to engage with the school, and now we all work together, and like there's been so much improvement." And, I feel like there are many communities in which that mom had... [jump cut in video] That you like meet her fight with like fight as opposed to like recognizing she cares about her kids just as much as I care about my kids, and she's there because she cares about her kids, and like so how do we do this without like being mean to each other?

And that--but that's what you learn in community. You don't learn by like... How would she know how to do that if like we hadn't engaged her in that way? And, I'm not... I mean, she'd be fine,, and her kids would be fine. They'd like work out whatever they needed to work out to survive, but she sees, I think, a different way of doing things and a wider range of opportunities for her kids through this community that we have created with her. And so, that is what is important to me. And, this would be really, really...this world would be really lonely without the community I've created at the Boggs School. Like I...I don't know how people live in this world without going and being around kids, like [laughs] 'cause they're so...they're so much better.

[1:39:25]

HT: And...thank you, by the way. And also, my other question is--you may have touched on this as well, but...

JP: That's okay!

HT: ...how has the relationship between the Boggs School and DPS--or if there isn't any relationship, in what ways do you foresee a relationship, whether it's in a consulting capacity or anything like that?

JP: No one at DPS has ever asked to consult with us. [long pause] That's a hard question. I...you know, I think there are a few people who set out to cheat kids, and so I don't propose that that is what people who are in traditional schools are doing, [pause] but I do think it's really hard to reimagine things. When we asked Grace if we could name the school after her, she said, "Yes, with two things. One, I want Jimmy's name included, and two, you have to think beyond what you even believe is possible." She's like, "You all have been indoctrinated as to what school is, and you've been successful in that in what that is, and when things get hard, you will default to that because you won't know anything else if you don't think beyond what you believe is possible." And so, I'm not sure there are other

educators thinking beyond what they believe is possible, and so it's hard to have conversations with other educators because the language is different. Kids are bad, kids don't care, parents don't care, and they're also--and--and!--we all are being set up to compete against one another as opposed to all figuring out how to collectively care for our kids. And so, right now, there isn't really a relationship, but it's not because like our two entities are at odds or anything like that. I just think we're doing different stuff.

HT: Thank you.

PB: Thank you.

JP: Thank you.