

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

Angela Reyes

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER

June 15, 2019

Detroit, Michigan

Narrator

Angela Reyes is the founder and executive director of the Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation (DHDC). She has been an activist based in Southwest Detroit for over 30 years. Before founding DHDC in 1997, she worked for Latin Americans for Social and Economic Development as well as Latino Family Services. She obtained her Master's Degree in Public Health from the University of Michigan. Working in the community of Southwest Detroit, she has participated in important policy decisions impacting schools, jobs and neighborhoods. Exhibiting a great passion for the educational system of Detroit, she holds great hope for the children who she believes are the future of her community.

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

In this interview, Angela Reyes discusses her experiences as well as those of the Latino community at large in and around Southwest Detroit. She talks about the continuing gentrification and urban renewal that is happening in the city. This includes issues such as the building of a second bridge to Canada and other planned developments by corporations impacting the community. The plight of immigrants is discussed as she describes how they are treated in relation to housing, jobs, and education and the racism that they face. She focuses on the educational system, including Detroit Public Schools and charter schools, and the policy discussions she participated in to reform them. Ms. Reyes also relates her experiences working with gang members in the community, even helping to form a truce between them.

Keywords

Charter schools; Chicano-Boricuo Colectivo; Community benefits agreements; Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation; Detroit Public Schools; Detroit, Michigan; Education; Emergency management; Environmental justice; Gangs; Gentrification; Housing; ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement); Immigration; LA SED (Latin Americans for Social and Economic Development); Policing; Public health; Southwest Detroit; STRESS (Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets); Trauma

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Transcript of interview conducted June 15, 2019 with:

Angela Reyes [AR]

Detroit, Michigan

By: Peter Blackmer [PB]

AR: My name is Angela Reyes. I'm the Executive Director of Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation, and I am a lifelong native Detroiter, particularly in Southwest Detroit [Michigan], born and raised and lived and worked here all my life.

[0:00:25]

PB: Could you describe for us what your neighborhood was like growing up?

AR: So, the Latino community was originally in Corktown. A lot of people have forgotten that, but that was where the Mexican population moved in. And actually, Puerto Ricans had moved into that area and then some Maltese, so it...it... Corktown, which has been kinda the gateway for a lot of immigrant populations, was where our family was there. So, my great-grandparents' house is still there, but where I lived and my grandmother's house is gone now because when I was very little, the city was involved in some of their early urban--or what we refer to as urban removal projects. So, they decided they wanted Corktown to be light industry because it was close to downtown. So, they bought up, very cheaply, a lot of people's beautiful old Victorian homes and tore them down. So, what you see now in Corktown of a lot of the hotels and businesses and warehouses and stuff were not there. Those were all residential areas. It was all

homes. So, they moved a lot of people out of their homes, and it was actually empty for quite some time then as they moved people further west.

So, the Latino community then started to move west in the city of Detroit. So, then moved to what they call Hubbard Richard 'round where the Ambassador Bridge is. Then when the Ambassador Bridge started to expand, a lot of the homes in that area started to get mysteriously burned down, and there was a lot of truck traffic back in the [19]60s and [19]70s, and I tell people I remember this one incident where I was on the phone with my boyfriend at the time--I was probably 17--and he was laying in the bed talking to me on the phone, and the ceiling collapsed on him because trucks were going by his house on 18th Street. So, they were going...they were shaking all the...the foundations of the homes causing the homes to fall apart. So, this was early Ambassador Bridge, Matty Maroun.

So, they decided to expand the bridge, all of the plaza area. And so, a lot of the houses were going up in flames, and the fire department wasn't really showing up. People moved again. So if you see that area of the neighborhood now too, there are very few homes left as well too from what was before that very densely populated, and they're still dealing with the truck traffic going by Sainte Anne's, which is like the second oldest Catholic Church in the country. It's actually--and Sainte Anne's is the oldest, the oldest church. It was the only church when the Europeans came to the city of Detroit, so all of the original birth, death, baptism, wedding records are in Sainte Anne's records, including all the people--records of people who were held as slaves at the time. Both African American and Native American slaves who were held, their records are with Sainte Anne's records. A lot of people don't realize that, yeah.

So then, so people got pushed even further than Hubbard, the Hubbard Farms area, which wasn't called "Hubbard Farms" back then, and over closer to Junction. I...it was...people in my generation, when they were very young and were moving into that area, it was mostly white at the time, mostly Polish. So, it was hard moving into that area because we weren't--families weren't very welcome. It was very segregated even for the Latino communities at that time. But, it's been a process. And now, the communities getting gentrified. And with the second bridge being put in there and all the transportation projects, people are being pushed even further. So, a lot of people are actually moving out of Detroit and moving

down river, so Lincoln Park [Michigan], Ecorse [Michigan], River Rouge [Michigan], Allen Park [Michigan], because what people used to pay 500 dollars a month for rent is now going for 1500 dollars. So, it's...it's become very gentrified, and that's become very difficult particularly for the migrant population.

About...probably about 15, almost 20 years ago, we started to see a new wave of...of immigrants, mostly Mexican and then later Central Americans, moving into the community. Because like 25 years ago, we didn't even talk about immigration being an issue in our community 'cause most people were second, third generation, but it's become a huge issue because now you have a new immigrant vulnerable population living right smack on the busiest international border in the country. So, Border Patrol is right there. ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] is there. They follow parents as they're dropping their kids off at school. They have tasered and dragged people off the steps of churches. They go to people's homes. They raid businesses. They raid restaurants. So, it's... People are very vulnerable, and there's a lot of trauma, including amongst the children because they never know if they're...they're gonna come home from school and their parents are going to be there or not. Or if they're driving down the street if the police pull up behind them, they...they're really worried that they're gonna pull 'em over and that they are gonna take their parents away.

So, the conditions have really changed in our community because of that, and the gentrification is only making it worse because then you have new people moving in and if they don't like you, they get into a conflict with their neighbor who happens to be an immigrant, they threaten to call immigration on them. So before, you'd just get into an argument. Now, they call immigration and have them deported. So, we've had an incident actually downriver where a Latino family was, and a white couple decided that they looked like they didn't belong there, so they called immigration on them. So, this is happening more and more in our community. So, it...it's causing a lot of grief and suffering.

[0:06:20]

PB: What do you attribute those kind of changes that you're describing to?

AR: This--systemic issues, of course. The racism, a very broken immigration system which is very racialized, was originally designed to keep the majority of the population white after all of the genocide, and I, you know, I think it's also the economy because if you keep people uneducated and afraid, you're able to maintain a source of cheap labor. So, you break the education system, you break the unions, and you break the immigration system, and those create conditions for you to be able to keep a source of poor, vulnerable people for cheap labor.

[0:07:13]

PB: Can you tell me about any instances of discrimination or racism that you encountered growing up?

AR: [pause] Yeah. [pause] There'd been a lot of personal stuff growing up, particularly when we were in the communities that going to school where they were more white population, being told that I was ugly, being called names all the time when I went to high school too. They would--there was a group of older girls who would beat on the lunchroom table like drums because I'd--my Indigenous background shows up a lot, and they would make comments to me when I was in the hallway. So, there was a lot of that going on. Getting spit on, being called all kinds of names, that was a constant thing. And, I didn't understand where it was coming from or why, especially when I was real little. So, you think there is something wrong with yourself not understanding that it's part of a...a larger system of racism.

[0:08:21]

PB: So as...as you got older, how did you make sense of that and like come to that kind of understanding?

AR: So, I think for...for most people of color who've faced with things like that, you do one of two things. Either you turn internally and become very depressed and

angry, or you become very radical. I chose the second. [laughs] So, I...I made a conscious effort to learn about who I was and my people's history and culture and kind of the...the... Growing up in the [19]70s especially, there was a lot of activism, civil rights movements. I joined the Chicano movement. I--was when they were first starting the Chicano-Boricua Studies at Wayne State University, so I was able to go there. It was like the first time I actually felt that...that we were valued as human beings. But even then, several of us that were in class together, like 10 or 12 of us, would register for the same class. The first day of class, all the white students would unregister from the class, [laughs] the...that Wednesday 'cause they didn't want to be in the class with us. We were all very actually radical at that time.

So, we also formed the Chicano-Boricua Colectivo, a lot of those people. We were all very young. I was 17 at the time, and there were other people who were 18, 19, early 20s. Those are the same people who became the leaders in our community and founded a lot of the organizations like CHASS Clinic [Community Health and Social Services Center], LA SED [Latin Americans for Social and Economic Development], SER-Metro [Jobs for Progress], so. And then, they actually say--so, there's those people. I learned a great deal from them, and they have stayed in the struggle for 50 years, committing themselves to moving their community forward.

And, people have asked me like, "How did Southwest Detroit get to be so organized?" And, we weren't that way back in the day, but I tell people it's because...it's because we knew nobody was coming to save us. We were so isolated from everybody else, we knew that we had to--if there was any change that was gonna happen, we were gonna have to make it happen ourselves. So, we established a lot of nonprofits. We did a lot of organizing. I learned very early on how to organize, and I think one of the first things we did and--organize around education. I was around 17, and some of the people who were part of our group, the Colectivo, they had younger siblings who were going to one of the local schools, middle school, and they were saying that the teachers and the principal were very racist. So, we helped organize a walk out in, I think it was, 1973 of middle school kids, and the young man who was the leader of that middle school walk out is an attorney now working civil rights. So, it--the whole history of doing that kind of work. And, there was a--at that time in the [19]70s, walkouts in schools on Latino communities across the country were happening. So, we were

part of that whole movement of young people walking out of school to protest the conditions in the school and the racism that was happening.

[0:11:28]

PB: So, as you're developing this kind of radical consciousness and getting, like, your feet wet in organizing, who or what were some of your biggest influences?

AR: So, the influence for the Chicano-Boricua Colectivo were both the Brown Berets and the Young Lords. So, we had both Mexican and Puerto Rican, which is very unique for--most Latino communities are only Mexican or only Puerto Rican or only Cuban. Because we're relatively small community, everyone's mixed in together. So, we had both influences from the Brown Berets and the Young Lords, and the Black Panthers were part of that, AIM was part of that, the American Indian Movement. So, we had a collaborative that worked together across all the different groups of color as well as back then the folks who were the editors of *The South End* at Wayne State University.

So, we did a lot of things to support the work they were doing around the STRESS [Stop The Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets] police, who were raiding a lot of homes of African Americans and killing them. So, we were very involved in kinda supporting those efforts as well too. So, it was really a collaborative of people of color across the city of Detroit working together. There were also people in the labor movement like General Baker and other folk--a bunch of folks that I learned a lot of organizing from them as well, too. So, it was a combination of things. I actually went--was sent to cadre school in Chicago [Illinois] for a month to learn. I studied dialectical-historical materialism and organizing and, you know, Marxist-Leninist theory and then came back and taught it to other people. I was... I think I was like 19 when I went. So, that was very, very much influential for me, especially at that time. That was probably like [19]74, 1974, so yeah.

PB: That's a fascinating period.

AR: Yes.

PB: You could probably spend hours [laughs] just talking about it.

AR: Yup, the Kilpatricks and other people that were involved in a lot of th...the behind-the-scenes. Th...the...there were attorneys that were very radical that were supporting a lot of the...the union organizing work, too.

[0:13:45]

PB: Um-hm. So, this is a bit of a jump, but could--like, I guess, how... So, how does that, your background in radical organizing in the 1970s, then translate into the founding of DHDC [Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation]? Could you walk us like through that jump and like what...how that influences the founding of your organization?

AR: So, [pauses] in the sev--late [19]70s... So... Well...well, [19]74, [19]75, back then, we didn't have any youth programs in Southwest Detroit except for summer programs that lasted about 8 weeks, no year-round programs. So, I was... I started running some of those programs for the summer and then thought it was pretty stupid that there were not year-round programs. So, I started organizing people in our community to look at the possibilities of starting some year-round youth programming, and some of the older folks were kind of pissed off at me because I didn't ask their permission, and I was this young kinda whipper-snapper, "Who the hell are you?" and "You didn't ask our permission" and "Who do you think you are telling us what we need to be doing?" [laughs]

But as a result of that, I think it was LA SED [Latin Americans for Social and Economic Development] then 'cause I was working at LA SED. So, they started their youth program. So, I worked for a while for them. Then in the meantime, I ended up getting married, had four children, got divorced when my children were between the ages of nine months old and six years old, raising four kids, went back to Wayne State 'cause I had dropped out earlier. Many of us who were

involved in the organizing at Wayne State ended up dropping out for a while and going back because we were paying more attention to organizing than our education. [laughs] So, we had to kinda take a long--the long route back to school. So after I had divorced with four kids, I decided to go back to Wayne State and...and get my bachelor's degree in political science, pre-law, actually, and then started working afterwards at Latino Family Services as the Youth Director there.

And because of the training I had had, I knew that providing services was very important, but if you don't address the underlying issues, things were never gonna change. So, I've always had a thread of activism in all the work that we were doing. And so, when I started working with the kids at Latino Family Services in the mid-[19]80s... [sighs] The things...the things that I have seen people...adults do to children [pauses] should never happen to anybody. A parole officer who was using kids to deal drugs for him, and one family that end up literally kinda selling their two little boys to him for sex so that they would leave the rest of the family alone. A school counselor who then became a vice principal who thought gangs were cool and started buying clothes for some of the gang members and taking them into his apartment and getting them high and bringing in prostitutes and watching them have sex and abusing them. Things like that, and when we would report it to authorities, there was nobody to report this stuff to, nobody.

Police, who, you know, the gang squad I used to--gang squad just loved me back then. They used to beat the crap out of kids with things like a bag of oranges because they cause a lot of damage, but then you get to throw the oranges away and there's no evidence, right? Make little kids in their shorts kneel in the middle of a hot street on glass just for the hell of it. My son, who, you know, was growing up then, taking--he--walking to the park with his friends and just stopping him and putting his face on the hood of a hot car, you know, holding a knife to a kid's ears. And, gang squad back then, they called themselves ironically 'ICE,' Inner City Enforcers. They used to wear leather jackets and big gold chains and acted like another gang. They were another gang having shootouts with the kids. I mean, it was... Ripping the...ripping them off for their drugs and then keeping it and selling it themselves.

So, you know, [pauses] things had to change. There was a lot of things that needed to change, and we had so many deaths of kids. So many young people

were dying, and a lot of that I think--we didn't have gangs in our neighborhood until the late [19]80s, and I think that a lot of that is tied to the economy because we also had Cadillac, Fisher Body, Fleetwood, all those plants were in our community. People had middle-class jobs and lived in Southwest Detroit still. And then, all those plants closed, all those jobs went away, and young people didn't have any hope. We had an 87 percent dropout rate in the schools in our community, and a lot of those kids were not counted because they were gonna--they were dropping out in middle school, and it wasn't really a dropout rate. It was really a push-out rate where they were just being kicked out, or a couple times, like, they knew girls who had gotten pregnant, and the truancy officer would go to their house and have the parents, who didn't speak English, sign a paper saying it's okay for the kids not to go back to school, and the parents had no idea what they were signing, and they're better off staying at home and having their baby because they were being pushed out constantly.

I was going to so many funerals for kids, three, four a month. Kids, some involved in gangs, some who were laying in their bed and got shot and killed be--by a stray bullet. It was pretty constant. My own kids--being a single mom of four kids growing up in the neighborhood--still all, like many other young people in that generation, suffer from PTSD [post-traumatic stress syndrome] because of the number of deaths that they had experienced over the years. My son, my--who's my youngest--he's...he talks a lot about what he experienced, and he does a lot of work now with young people too. But, there was one time when he was standing out--it was on Cinco de Mayo--standing on the corner of Vernor watching people drive up and down the street, and there was another young man standing next to him, and my son had just stepped away when somebody shot this...this other young man, and he turned around, and he was laying on the street with his brains on the sidewalk.

When you see things like that constantly, they used to have nightmares about being in a casket themselves and seeing themselves dead. When we asked young people, teenagers, "Where do you see yourself in ten years?" 90 percent of them would say either locked up or dead. So, when you have no hope for the future, you're gonna do a lot of things just because you're living only for the moment, and I see that cycle repeating itself again now as people struggle with the really bad economy.

So, I actually left Latino Family Services and then started DHDC. It started with a grace program. So, what we did was myself and a few other people was talk to the leadership of several of the rival gangs, and...and they agreed to come to a meeting to form a truce. So, we met at Sainte Anne's church with the pastor then. Mayor [Dennis] Archer came. Ike [Isaiah] McKinnon, who was the Chief of Police, came, and it was just before Devil's Night--because it was Devil's Night still then--and they agreed to have a truce for that weekend as well as kind of help patrol to keep the fires down. So, it's funny because they said, "So, you want us to be angels for the weekend?" and they said, "Yeah, we want you to be angels." So, a lot of the guys still say that, you know, they were the ones responsible for changing it from 'Devil's Night' to 'Angel's Night,' but they don't get credit for it. [laughs]

But, that was the start. So, we started the grace program, which was a gang retirement program and fo--these were young adults, and trying to get them out of the gang, get them an education, and getting them jobs 'cause many of them had dropped out of school. They were tired themselves of like having all their friends ki--die. A lot of them were young parents themselves too. They didn't want the same thing for their own children. So, getting the leadership out of--not out of the gang, because you don't really leave the gang, but out of gang activity and doing something productive.

And then, we had people who literally were shooting at each other one day became co-workers the next day 'cause we had formed a partnership with--there were four Hispanic-owned tier-one suppliers to the auto industry who decided they were going to move back into one of the old Cadillac buildings--kind of ironic, came full circle. And so as they were moving in there, they agreed to hire these young men and women who were coming out of the gang, and it gave them an opportunity to really change their lives around. Giving them hope, giving them a space where they can be responsible for their family and take care of their family where they didn't have to worry about looking over their shoulder.

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So, when you had rival gang leaders then being not just co-workers but then becoming friends, it opened the door for the younger kids then to also let some of that stuff go. So, we were able to then go into a period of...of peace in our community whe--you know, I--somebody asked me, "How do you...how do you evaluate what...the impact of what you've done?" I said, "Well, I measure it by how many gun shots I hear during the night from my bed," and it had been [pauses] pretty much almost every night you would hear gunshots, and it went from that to not hearing any for long periods of time. So, we knew it was working. It was not scientific. [laughs] You couldn't do a pre- and post-test, but, you know, it...it really did make an impact on young people, so.

There have been things that we have collectively done in our community to try to improve education because we knew that that was really the key. Being in a Lat--a very small isolated Latino community, there were a lot of issues that in education that our kids were facing that weren't the same as the rest of the city. So, trying to get bilingual education was something that we had to fight for. So, we fought for that. We were successful in getting bilingual education in our schools. We've lost it since then. We don't have, really, bilingual education. We have some elements of English as a second language, but bilingual education is very different where you're teaching the kids their primary subjects in their native language while they're learning English, which is much more effective than teaching them English and having them sit in the other classes in English and tryin' to...tryin' to learn those things at the same time while you're trying to pick up a language. It's really difficult.

We fought to get teachers and school leaders who were from our community in place, so many of the principals for a long period of time and our schools then became...were from our community, which makes a huge difference because their commitment to the kids is very different. Their relationship to the community is very different when they're from the community and understand the conditions. We're starting to lose a little bit of that too. Again, the dropout rate was so high. So, it's...it's considerably better now.

But, we also have this other anomaly of how charter schools have come into the city of Detroit in particular--throughout Michigan, but in particular communities like Detroit, you know, when for--when charter schools first were introduced, it

was...it was a progressive idea, right? If the system is failing the kids, maybe we can run our own schools. They get public funding, they can do better. Kind of a progressive idea, right? In some places, that worked really well, but the way Michigan decided to put charter schools in place has been really a mixed bag because there's...there's no accountability, there's no transparency, there's no way to hold people accountable.

So somewhere along the line, the charter industry realized that we had a lot of kids in Southwest Detroit. So, everybody and their brother and their sister and their cousin decided they wanted to open a charter school in Southwest Detroit, including people whose only experience had been running a supermarket. Because children became a commodity, it's more about: where can you get the money? How much money can I make? Especially because Michigan allows for-profit managers, right? So if in--any for-profit entity thinks, "How can you get the most profit out of that process?" not "How much can you put into the classroom?" You know, when it's public money, you're supposed to be that...maximizing what goes into the classroom, not maximizing what goes into people's pockets, and that's kinda the situation we've been in.

And with having all these different authorizers without any coordination, without any connection to the community, without any way to hold them accountable, we've had this...all these opening and closing, opening, closing, and opening and closing of schools. At the same time, we had emergency managers take over the district who were opening and closing schools too without any accountability to...to people who lived in the city. So...so, everybody's education has gotten worse for the most part in the city of Detroit. It's not improved education. It's made it worse. So, it's like this rush...rush to the bottom. And then at the same time, how we fund education has gotten way worse, so all the schools struggle for enough resources to really do the things that need to be done for our kids.

So [pauses] several years ago--I'm trying to remember what year it was that the Coalition of Future Detroit Schools Children started. So, there were some of us who were working across the city of Detroit together to look at education reform and try to figure out how...where are the levers for making that change. Is it the authorizers? Is it the managers? Is it the state? Is it local? And, trying to figure all of that out. And in the meantime, the governor, Governor [Rick] Snyder, was ready

to make a decision about what was gonna happen to the Detroit School District because we were so much in debt from all of this mismanagement from the state that it look like they were--we were really afraid that they were just gonna close the district and charterize the entire city which the...the...happened in several other places, and that was really what it was looking like, especially because there's this huge push from powers-that-be that have a lot--are making a lot of money off of charters and pay off a lot of our politicians at the state level to charterize and privatize everything.

So, we asked the governor to hold off on making the decision for 90 days while people from the city of Detroit came together to try to...to...to make a plan for our own children and our own community. Surprisingly, he agreed. So, we rushed to pull people together across the city to one of the cross sectors to try really come up with a viable plan of what needed to happen with the city with our educational system. We...we started a small group of about 10 or 15. It grew to a steering committee of about 40. And then, we formed several subcommittees and then added people to each of those subcommittees. So, we ended up with a total of about 150 people working intensively for like 90 days. So, some of us were working--[laughs] I think...I swear it was probably about a hundred hours a week just on this in our spare time--our spare time. So, it really took over our lives for that period of time.

We were intentional about trying to bring people from different sectors in both...both sides of the aisle because we knew if we were gonna get a...any legislation passed in Michigan, we had to have people on both sides of the aisle, alright? So--but there are people on both sides of the aisle who actually believed that we needed to do better for our kids. So, we had teachers, principles, parents, youth, union, people from the district, people from charter schools, people from philanthropy, people from the faith organizations, people from just about every sector, business--we...we brought in a lot of the business sector who really supported what we were trying to do--and came up with a list of recommendations in that 90 days that we presented to the governor and the legislators. And then, nothing happened [pauses] for over a year.

And, a lot of the conversations that were happening in Lansing [Michigan] were really disgustingly racist especially because, you know, the...such a large African

American population. The people were, “We don’t... It’s...it’s those peoples fault. They did this to themselves. They’re lazy. Their parent...the parents don’t care about the kids. That’s why the school system is so bad. That’s why education is so bad because those people made it a mess.” No. It was under the control of the state. They made all the decisions about the education we--they were blaming the victims.

So, we finally were able to get some traction and got the legislators to finally admit that the debt belonged to the state--not to the city, not to the district, not to people in Detroit, but the state. They made... They incurred that...that... They created that mess, they needed to pay it down. So, that was one of the things that we won. They did that. Not as much as they should’ve. There was still...there was still way more money that we needed, but at least it...it...they covered some of the debt and created two separate bodies. That’s when they created the Detroit--DPS [Detroit Public Schools] City of Detroit Public School Community District, and DPS stayed with the debt, and the new district started without any debt.

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We also pushed to have an elected school board back and to return it back to the control of the...the citizens of the city so--and at first, the governor was telling us in some private meetings we had with him, “Maybe in seven years we can transition to an elected board,” [laughs] and I...I think I almost started crying, I was so angry when we were meeting with him. I said, “You... [huffs] It has already been almost 16 years that we have not had an elected school board, and it has not gotten better. It’s gotten horribly worse.” Said, “You’re gonna have a revolt on your hands if you do not give us schools back.” So, they finally agreed to allow us to have an elected school board, although they changed how the school board was structured because a school board had been elected...had...more members had been elected by a neighborhood as well as city-wide. Then, they changed it to be just city-wide.

But, you know, I...I think we have a pretty decent school board that has been really working hard, and we were able to get an actual educator running our

schools in the district as opposed to a retired business person or somebody trained by the Koch brothers, which most of the emergency managers were, and I remember reading this thing on the Koch brothers' website--they actually had it printed. It was published on their website--saying that their strategy was to go into communities and create chaos so they can get their agenda passed without people realizing that's what was happening. And, that's what they did. They created chaos. So, [laughs] being aware of that and trying to push back on that and make people aware of it, parents and students and residents in the city of Detroit. It's still an ongoing battle for people to understand what the systemic issues are.

We also fought for them to return the EAA [Education Achievement Authority] schools--which was a state takeover of the state takeover, which is a really bizarre thing--and the schools that they pulled out of the district, and we fought for them to be returned back to the district. The sad thing was that several of those schools became so horrible under the EAA system that they closed. So, there was one...one middle school in Southwest Detroit, Phoenix Academy, that...that just closed permanently because the...the...things were just so bad, kids were just so bad. They were just experimenting on their kids of what they were going to do. So, they didn't have grades. They had this online curriculum that had not been completely developed. Some for-profit company was trying to develop--it was just a mess. It was a mess.

So, we...we won those few things. We were trying, really trying, to get more control of transparency and accountability for charter schools. We did not succeed in doing that. That's something that I think only now are people across the state maybe looking at because other communities are starting to see the negative impact of all these charters coming in and pulling resources away from the schools that are already there and not having any accountability. Some charter schools do a very good job, [pauses] but we--it's up to them whether they're gonna do a good job or not. And when they don't do a good job, there's no way to hold them accountable, not the authorized either because their board of trustees are off in a whole other city, Grand Rapids [Michigan] or the UP [Upper Peninsula of Michigan] or somewhere else, and all the--most of the entities that charter are authorized schools. They're not--they don't have elected boards. They're all appointed boards. So, they're not accountable to anybody except themselves. So, it's really, really hard to hold people accountable for doing the right things.

So, we're experiencing that right now with one of the schools in Southwest Detroit where we had a charter management entity that was national. Can I say the name? Is that alright? It was Lighthouse [Academies]. They...they were meeting with a group of us from Southwest Detroit that said they wanted to bring this charter school into our community that was arts and music infused. And particularly at that time--we were still under emergency management, and there weren't any schools that were really offering arts and music, which is really important for our communities for the kids to experience that. Some of us went and visited some of their other schools that they had chartered and were managing in Chicago and other places. We were really impressed with what they were doing. They did a really good job of community engagement. We said, "Yes, we support you. We want the school here," and they lasted a couple of years, and they said, you know, "We really didn't understand the environment of Detroit, so we're out." Left.

So [laughs] then, their school board struggled to find another management company that ended up being kinda--it was a new management company, had no experience, was kind of self-management. So, of course, they imploded. Plus, the owners of the building, the people who invest--there...there was an investment company that built the building that owned it. So, the school's paying them a...a lease, and they ended up having to pay like 1,800 dollars per student for the lease, so they couldn't afford it. So, they're...they're closing the school because they couldn't afford the lease.

Now, the people who were supposed to oversee that and make sure that those things are equitable, reasonable, sound financial plan is the authorizer. The authorizer didn't do anything to help that. If anything, they exacerbated the situation. And when we would meet with the authorizer, the representative, he would lie to us--lie, bald face lie to our face. There was a..one other school, charter school, that they had authorized that we had--I specifically asked him, "What's going on with the school? We heard rumors that they're struggling. What are your plans for the school?" "Oh, we're gonna keep the school open. We're very committed to keeping the school open. No problem." A week later, the school got a letter saying they were closing them. He knew, obviously, a week before that that was the plan. The same with this one, same thing. We met with him, and he

told us, “No, we’re committed to keeping the school open. We’re committed to keeping the union in the school. We wanna make sure it stays there. We’re gonna engage the community.” Didn’t happen, school’s closing. And, they’re trying to--they’re blackballing, really, any management company that wants to come in there and open--and stay in the building to open a school. Why? Who knows.

But, one thing stuck in my head when we were meeting with him. He said, “Dirt in Southwest Detroit is gold.” [pauses] Hm, the school’s not far from Michigan Avenue. Ford Motor Company moved in. They’re talking about doing a lane down Michigan Avenue between Corktown and Dearborn [Michigan] for the autonomous vehicle. So, they’re expecting a lot of development to happen along Michigan Avenue. I wonder if that has something to do with it? Who knows? There’s always plans that other people have way in advance of anybody knowing about it that might cause those kind of things to happen. So, I don’t really know what their plans are for that school, but it’s the kind of thing that we’re continuing to struggle and fight with.

You know, and then still, people start talking about bringing additional schools into our community, and what we’re looking at is what’s the ecosystem of schools in our community? If you bring another school in and these schools already have empty seats and then you’re pulling kids out of those schools, these schools are not gonna close because they still have kids there, but they have less resources. So, what you’re doing, essentially, is making education worse for everybody in the community instead of enhancing it. So, maybe it might be maybe better in that school for those few kids, but the rest of the community is then gonna suffer. There is no coordination. There is no strategic plan to look at how you’re creating ecosystems and impacting the entire community, and that’s what’s happening across the city of Detroit. They just open and close whenever they feel like it without really looking at the impact. It’s, can I make more money? Can I get--pull kids away from there? It’s like, can I get a bigger market share? But, the market’s not growing. We’re not getting additional kids in the city of Detroit. So, they’re...they’re fighting over the same number of kids because they’re a commodity.

[0:41:15]

PB: So, what...what was proposed to address--or, what was your recommendation in your report to address this? And, I guess, you know, from the vantage point of a few years now, what would a recommendation now look like in terms of holding partners accountable?

AR: We had proposed that there would be an entity that would be like a board that would oversee both, not just charters, but public schools. Not control them, but that each community and neighborhood would be able to have a...a group of parents, teachers, leaders that would create an education plan for their community. If they need a school, if they didn't need a school, that would present that to this body. And then, they would make recommendations about whether or not there needed to be a school opening or closing in the community and what it should look like as well as coordinating the wrap-around services for the kids in the community because those things are particularly important for poor children to have a...a whole lot of support systems in place that are just as important as what's happening in the classroom.

It didn't happen. It wasn't legislated, but the mayor [Mike Duggan] has tried to do something voluntary with that. It's been largely successful in trying to get kids into after school programs in the Northwest side of Detroit but has--is not having the...the impact. It can't because it's not...it's not legislated, so people voluntarily come to the table or not. Really, I think we need to overhaul the entire charter school system in the state of Michigan: how they're authorized, who authorized them. They need to be--in many other cities, there's one central authorizing body. And in a lot of cases, it's the school district itself that authorizes charter schools if you need a specialty school in one place or another, not just this free-for-all so that--it really needs to change. It really needs to change so...so that there is a way of them being held publicly accountable and being transparent, and there's a coordination across all the different schools that benefit the children. So, what's in the best interest of our children has not been considered in any of the way it's structured now. It has to change.

[0:43:44]

PB: What became of that coalition? Did it have life beyond the initial board? Did it maintain momentum?

AR: We did a 2.0 set of recommendations of--because the first...the first set of recommendations were primarily focused on what we did we need to change legislatively. The second version was really looking at what can we do ourselves with the...the infrastructure and the resources that we have within the city. So, things like focusing on the absentee rate because we have a very high absentee rate in the city of Detroit. Some of it has to do with transportation. Some of it has to do with health. We have real high levels of asthma. Some of it has to do with poverty, homelessness.

So, it's not just enforcing attendance. It's really looking at what are some of those underlying issues causing kids to miss so much school, right. So, not blaming parents, but trying to see how can we support them in some of this. Looking at some of the early childhood--third grade reading is a whole other area because that was a legislation that got passed. Had nothing to do with us, but it's--if the legislation is followed to the letter, there's gonna be almost every kid in...in Detroit is gonna be held back in the third grade, and the system is not designed for that. Plus, holding kids back only makes them--even in the third grade--puts them more at risk for dropping out later on and for failing. So, trying to find ways to really help children at an earlier age has been a huge effort across the city and focusing on early childhood.

There has been some other efforts, too, across the city to focus on--for older kids particularly--trauma. And how do we address the collective trauma? Trauma doesn't happen in isolation. It happens because of the environment that young people and their families are growing up in. So, we have whole communities who are experiencing trauma, and you can see it in people because their...their trigger level is...is real, real low because of the amount of trauma people experience at a very young age. It changes your brain, changes how your brain operates, all your brain development and your cognitive development. And unless we acknowledge that and deal with that, we're gonna keep having the levels of violence in our city that we have because it's systemic issues that are causing that. So, we have to address those kind of things.

And then, looking at a--different groups are looking at things like career pipelines and how do you get young people successfully graduating from high school and then getting into post-secondary education and being successful there, whether it's skilled trades or two-year college or four year, you know. I think industry in some...some of the businesses have acknowledged the fact that they are not able to hire people, enough people, to fill a lot of their higher-skilled jobs. They need people, and if they--they spend a lot of money recruiting people from other places, and that works for a little while, but those people don't stay. So, their best investment is to invest in the people who are here, and the young people are here. We're gonna stay here, and they're starting to realize that. So, there's a business case now for businesses to now start investing and improving the educational outcomes of our young people in the city of Detroit.

[0:47:12]

PB: From what your coalition-building perspective... Really, coalition building can be kinda a mixed bag in terms of like who you're getting into bed with when you bring a wide group of different stakeholders together. How do you navigate tensions in terms of bringing together groups that certain members of a coalition might have problems with, whether it's non-profit or business interests? How do you hold that space and handle those conflicts and contradictions?

AR: Coalition work is probably the most difficult kind of work to do. The ones that have been successful that we've been part of, we spent a lot of time up front focusing first on our core values. If you don't agree to these core values and can't come back to them when there's tension, then you don't belong as part of it. So, like with this coalition in particular, we started with that, spending a lot of time looking at what are our core values and making sure everybody agrees to them, and there were times when people got into really heated arguments and were reminded about these are our core values, this is how...wh...what we agreed is most important to--children are most important. Egos have to be set aside. Your institutional interests have to come second. They can't be at the forefront and at the table here. So, we had to be there as individuals committed to the future of our children, not to our own personal agendas. So, whether it was the union,

whether it was business, whether it was whoever--it was the charters--that's what we...we demanded from each other.

It worked most of the time, but there, you know, there were also be--and I can say this now, but there were--also was behind-the-scenes organizing. So, we had sub-coalitions, and we would meet--all the progressive folks would meet behind the scenes knowing what some of the issues were coming up for vote, and we would agree to support each other's issues, especially if there were things that this is a non-negotiable. This has to be in place. There has to be parent voice, has to be student voice. There has to be an elected school board. Whatever those were, we had agreements separately from that, that those were non-negotiables, and we went into those coalitions supporting them and making sure that those things passed.

We had a very unique way of decision making which was kind of a modified consensus, which you can imagine with so many diverse people was very difficult to do, but it meant that if people didn't agree, we had to have more conversation. And, amazingly enough, having those conversations helped people realize that we had more in agreement than we knew, especially when we talked about values. So, there was only the final--we voted only at the final recommendations. That was the only time when it was a majority that voted, and it was--on all of the recommendations except for one, it was unanimous. The one where we didn't have unanimous voting was for the one entity that would oversee both the opening and closing of schools for both DPS and the charters. So, we had people on both sides that woul--that had issues with that. But, the majority did vote for it.

So, I think having those deep conversations. Plus, the other thing was that we were very data-driven. Children and education is very emotional. I still--I get very emotional, as you can tell, talking about it because, you know, raising my own children and seeing--working with children all these years and seeing the impact of a horrible educational system is very emotional for me. But, we had to also look at what's...what's the data, what really is happening. A lot of people who we brought to the table were shocked to see some of the data of the test scores and even like how many people actually have cars in the city of Detroit. One of our partner organizations that were...were a member of 482Forward--that was one of

the original groups that we were doing organizing around--did a campaign in the middle of it where it was a...a walk with me or ride with me day in the middle--I think it was February. So, we asked some of the--especially the...some of the co-chairs and some of the leadership in the coalition on that particular day to either ride on the bus with the kids or walk with them to school to see what that was like.

In particular, one of our co-chairs who's a leader in the Republican Party, John Rakolta, who's--you know, he's a billionaire, right? He has a chauffeur. He decided to take the bus ride with one particular family that was coming from the Northwest side to the Southwest side to bring, I think it was, two or three children to a couple different schools. Getting--he got on the bus with a--with her and her family, and she had to--it took her two hours. They had to make a couple of bus changes, waiting for a bus in the cold, and it was still dark. There was nothing around. It was kinda an abandoned area where they're waiting for the second bus, and he asked them, "Why--you know, this one is like six blocks away. Why don't you just walk to that one to the next school?" "Just because there's a lot of stray dogs, and you'd get bit." When he realized--'cause he kept talking about he didn't understand how...what transportation had to do with kids and education.

After he took that bus route, he became one of the biggest proponents of transportation for kids because he experienced it for himself, he saw it with different eyes, and that was one of the things we did. We were very intentional about trying to do that, to see it from the perspective of other people and to walk in each other's shoes, particularly the children and parents whose lives this was directly affecting, and I think that's what helped make such a difference in this particular coalition, that...how intentional we were about doing things like that, and it was a lot of organizing efforts in various different aspects to get it to move where it did.

[0:53:12]

PB: How was the report received, like, outside of the policy makers and legislators? Like, how was it received by parents or by educational advocates and other organizers in the city that weren't at the table?

AR: It was really mixed at first because people didn't always understand what was in it, so--an...and rightfully so, people--many people in Detroit are very suspicious of anything, especially when you have such diverse people at the table. They're like, "How can this possibly be anything that's gonna benefit people?" So, we spent a lot of time talking to people about different aspects of it, and what was really important--so, people, any...anybody who came to hear those presentations, most, for the most part, ended up agreeing with it. The first time we were rolling it out at a press conference, I remember I think it was BAMN [By Any Means Necessary] showed up and crashed the doors and started protesting without really knowing what was in it. But, people are very passionate about education in the city of Detroit. You cannot tell me the parents don't care about their children in the city. People say that. It is not true. I have never met a parent who wasn't passionate about their children's education. They may not have had the resources and capacity to do anything about it, but they still cared very deeply about their children's future.

[0:54:30]

PB: One of the points of criticism I saw raised in response to the report was around the Detroit Education Commission, that board that...

AR: That was the one that we talked about, yes. So, there was a lot of like misunderstanding of what it was supposed to be, and it was really our attempt to try to have some accountability for the charters and the opening and closing of schools. Some people were afraid that it would then take over the role of the school board, Detroit elected school board, and opening and closing the schools. And, it...it wasn't a decision-making body. It didn't have any authority, wouldn't have had any authority to say yes or no to the school, but to make recommendations.

So, but it really was our attempt for there to be some coordination of that, especially because at that time DPS under emergency managers had closed a ton of schools without any rhyme or reason, thinking that those kids were going to

move to another school, and that didn't happen. A lot of those kids ended up dropping out of school 'cause they couldn't get to another school. So, that--we had the whole history of that happening of hundreds of schools being closed by the district as well. So, they didn't have a really good record [laughs] either of paying attention to the community voice about opening and closing schools. We did several protests about schools closing and opening with the district as well. So, that was part of that. The...the...the DEC was that attempt to try to have community voice and what--where schools were going and trying to coordinate some of those efforts. But, it was a complex kind of idea and kinda something real different then people were accustomed to. So, it...it was hard to understand what the intention was and how it would actually operate, so it never actually came to be.

[0:56:16]

PB: Was the...was part of that suggestion that that body would have been appointed by the mayor?

AR: [sighs] It was--that ended up being in the final recommendations. It was not... [pause] That was a compromise. Many of us wanted it to be partially elected and partially appointed or elected--fully elected. The mayor really wanted it to be all his appointees, and he said, "Either it is, or I'm walking away." So, it ended up... That was...that was a huge compromise because we still felt that it was an important entity to have, so. There was a lot of debate about that, a lot of heated discussions about trying to get that, what would that board look like.

PB: You must have dug in, right?

AR: Yes. So, you know, the people were--some of them were saying, "But if it's elected, then you're beholden to a different group of people, and then people would be confused between that and a elected school board." So, there wa--it was a complex kind of thing we were trying to create because...because of the fractured system that we're in. So, it was...definitely was not perfect. Really, it's the system itself that needs to be changed. So, it was kind the compromise

because we knew we couldn't--there was no way of controlling the charters at that time. But, really, the charters need to be centralized and under somebody that people elect so that we...there's direct accountability to the people who live in the community.

[0:57:54]

PB: I wanna come back to the point you're making about school closures and the protests that you were in. Could you talk a little bit about--I know we talk about school closures, and a lot of time it becomes a numbers game, and we're only looking at numbers and data and--could you talk a little bit about, like, the real costs of school closures in Southwest Detroit, how school closures have impacted communities?

AR: So, starting with the district schools. The first--we had three high schools in Southwest Detroit, Western, Southwestern, and Chadsey. First, they closed Chadsey, and they expected all the kids to go to Southwestern. That didn't work for a number of reasons. First, there were no buses that came from where Chadsey was to where Southwestern was. Kids would have had to have gotten a ride or walked or something. There was no way to get there. There wasn't a bus that went from that area to Southwestern. Secondly, we had rival gangs. Kids would have been putting their lives at stake to try to go from one school to the other school. It was different...different territories. So, a lot of those kids just ended up dropping out, and then they closed Southwestern. And Southwestern, where they were supposed to go, we had fought for years to get Southwestern to have a...a bit of a vo-tech [vocational and technical school] there because there isn't one in Southwest, and they had just invested millions of dollars into the school renovating it, putting a vo-tech in there. And then, they closed it and left the school abandoned wide open.

So, the kids at Southwestern and Western both had walkouts protesting the closing of the school because then the kids are supposed to all go...go to Western. Western is now way overcrowded. There's like 2,400 students in that school that was designed for half that. So, you...you know, there have been cases where they're trying to teach a class with kids on the steps or in what used to be a

storage room, you know. So, it's really hard to get a good education when you've got 50 kids in the classroom or in the closet or on the steps. [laughs] So, it's the drop out, you know. Kids dropped out. Their education levels are lower. They're struggling already with lower resources. So, it's been really hard for those kids who dropped out. Still something like 60 percent or higher of adults 25 years and older in our community do not have a high school diploma. What kind of job can you get?

[1:00:26]

PB: This is backing up a little bit, but I think it's important context. Could you tell a little bit about how, like, we got--there's this long history of state takeovers and emergency managers in the DPS. Could you speak, I guess, a little bit about how state takeovers have directly impacted your communities in Southwest? I know we've covered a lot of that already, but...

AR: Yeah. There, again, no--it was like the charters. There was no accountability. No accountability whatsoever. I remember one...one of the emergency managers--I can't remember which one of the Bobs [Robert Bobb or Roy Roberts?], [laughs]--had a...was a community meeting when they were talking about closing some of schools at Western High School, and parents and students and community members were really upset and talking about some of the conditions and how walking to the school--so, you close the school and walking there, and there's the stray dog issue. And, he went off on people there. He would, like, ball everybody out and say, "That had nothing to do with us. We can't control that. You people essentially are stupid." I mean, it was extremely disrespectful to the community.

So, I mean, it's just...it's been chaos. It...it really created chaos. There was no way--even though like Chadsey was...was...wasn't completely full but had a lot of kids there, Southwestern was full. They would close schools just because--for political reasons. He said...he tol--I remember him telling me, "We can't close schools in other areas and not close a school in Southwest Detroit because, politically, people would be mad at us. So, we have to close schools there too." Had nothing to do with..with how well the school was doing, what the numbers were. Wasn't even a numbers game. It was a political game, was all about politics.

So, Chads--the Chadsey area which--McGraw north of Michigan Avenue--that part of the community became devastated when the school closed. And, we--you know, because we also do a lot of, like, door-to-door outreach and voter registration. So then, the last--before the last election, we hit the most likely voters list, right, going to do door-to-door. Not only were those voters gone, just from the time of the last election to that one, their houses were gone, was just empty. So, that whole community was devastated after that. Schools are anchors for communities, and there's been even--even that, there's no coordination between housing and business development and schools. Those are supposed to all come together as part of a community, and nobody was looking at that either.

[1:03:11]

PB: So, we've heard a lot--I mean, we all know about what, like, the dominant narratives are about why the state took over Detroit Public Schools at various points or appointed emergency managers. But in your analysis, like, if we're countering those kind of dominant narratives, why has the state been so active in taking over and appointing emergency managers in DPS?

AR: [sighs] Really, I think it's...it comes down to money. You know, early on when the first takeover was, when we had that huge bond for all of the building repairs and building--and apparently, the people, the vendors, that the board was hiring were not the ones that the governor [John Engler] wanted. He wanted his own people there. So, that was part of it. I think the charter industry and the Devoses really controlled a lot of the legislators, and they...they actively, very actively, lobbied against the work that we were trying to do with the coalition too. And, you know, right after the election, a lot of them got a...huge donations from the Devoses. So, you know, they are very much for for-profit charter schools. You destroy the district, it becomes chartered.

I think that a lot of it had to do with that, and then that coupled with a systemic racism, and just the attitude that people of color can't control their own lives and are just irresponsible so somebody else has to come in because they're all messed

up I think also played a great deal into that. That was the narrative we kept running into in Lansing when we were trying to push for legislation. You people cannot control your own. You can't have a elected school board because you'd elect a bunch of crazy people, and you don't know what you're doing. So, I think that also played into the emergency manager for the city as well too.

PB: That's, I think, a good segue 'cause I was just about to ask...

AR: And, actually, we--people, a lot of people, don't realize that those...we also had an emergency manager over 36th District Court, a governor-appointed person who came in and took over 36th District Court. So, you had the court system, the educational system, and the city itself all being run by state-appointed emergency managers at one point. That pretty much covers the lifespan of people.

[1:05:38]

PB: So, what...what connections do you see in terms of appointing emergency managers over the school district and then followed up by appointing an emergency manager over the city at large?

AR: There is...there is definitely a connection over--with...with money. I mean, Detroit has been the seat of power for the State of Michigan for a long time. And just like the schools, you know, I think there's this underlying belief that, you know, the wrong people were in charge. They needed to get white folks there and businesses so that they could invest in the city of Detroit and bring it back. I--you know, I...I think people--there are many people who are afraid of people of color having a significant amount of power, both political and economic power.

[1:06:33]

PB: Well, we hear about, you know, emergency management in bankruptcy and the [Detroit] Free Press and the news and the popular narratives about Detroit.

It's--that's the start of Detroit's comeback, right? Like, that's the part where there's the white savior who comes into the mayor's office, and they clean books, and now Detroit's on the rise. With that kind of narrative, like, dominating popular spaces, I think it's important to ask, like, how have your communities been impacted by emergency management and bankruptcy? We talked a little about the educational sphere, but in general in the city.

AR: It's hard to say because it's so...it's kind of insidious. So, it's underlying pervasive kind of things, so--I do know, like, a lot of people who had worked for the city, retired for the city--my ex-husband was a Detroit firefighter. He has probably early stages of lung cancer and has to pay for his own insurance now. So, that's just one example of [laughs] how it impacts individuals. So, you know, why did those...those same people who are investing in the city now abandon it in the first place and then invest in it sooner? I don't... You know, I really don't understand. I mean, even the fact that the state has owed the city the...their share of the tax...tax revenue for decades, and if they had paid the city that amount, they probably wouldn't've had to go into bankruptcy, right? So, what's the reason for that?

Part of what I've told kids for many decades, particularly when there was a lot of gang activity, is that there are people who have plans for this community. The only thing in the way are the people who live here. So, how do you get the people out of the way is you destroy a community, and how do you--the easiest way to destroy a community is to destroy the young people. That's the future, right? So, told them by not getting involved in gangs and this activity is a form of resistance because you are not playing into the plans that some other people have for us.
[pause]

[1:09:10]

PB: I'm just pausing for a second 'cause I--that's really profound. So, I guess like just point blankly, has... This process of emergency management and bankruptcy, has there been any benefits for your community?

AR: The garbage gets picked up now! [laughs] It's hard to say. I mean, you know, there were things that should have been in place in the city and city services for a very long time. Why those things stopped, you know, you'd have to really look at what are those things that caused the...all of those services to disintegrate. Why was the city disinvested in so that they're coming back now? Is it because we had a bankruptcy and emergency management, or is it just because people--some people decided that it was time to change it because they wanted--there were other plans for what's happening in the city? I mean, you know, I think the most direct result is that our community has become extremely gentrified, and it's rap--happening so rapidly that it's frightening, how fast it's happening.

[1:10:33]

PB: How is--wait. I don't think we talked enough about, like, the real-life impacts of gentrification. Can you talk a little bit about how people in your communities are being directly impacted by gentrification? I mean, I already mentioned the part about weaponizing police in the interests of gentrification, but...

AR: Housing is a big issue. Again, we...we had very affordable housing in Southwest Detroit, and most people in our community did not buy and still don't buy houses from banks or mortgages. They buy it like contract or cash or, you know, inherit it from a family 'cause a lot of people have stayed there for a very long time. Now, it's really hard to do that. People are buying a house that used to go for 40,000 dollars is now going for 150,000 dollars. When you have people who are working four jobs to stay afloat, kind of hard to compete with that. Even land bank houses where you get--you know, it's a bidding process, so you get out-bid really quickly with--from somebody else who's got deeper pockets, you know. So, trying to get a house that way is--one of my staff had been successful in helping about 15 families get a house through the land bank, but it's been really hard because you're competing against people with deep pockets.

The demands on the educational system start to change. What people report and what people tolerate in your community start to change too. So, things like noise. We're a noisy people. We have large families and loud parties. Then, you got somebody from Grosse Pointe [Michigan] that moves in a couple doors down, and

they don't like that. So, they start calling the police and stuff like that that was the norm for us, you know. Parking enforcement on people in front of people's homes on residential streets, and people are getting 45 dollar tickets for parking in front of their house because their tires this much on the curb, you know. Stupid things like that that never was enforced or never paid attention to before are now having real life impacts on people. And then when the people start calling immigration on their neighbors, it makes it even worse. So between all of those different things, it's...it's a challenge.

[1:12:54]

PB: I mean, I guess overall, like, what's the message that the...that this...these kind of practices sends to long-time residents?

AR: That you don't belong. That you don't have the same value as somebody else. [pause] You're not important. In... Particularly, it's particularly harmful for children because they internalize that.

[1:13:17]

PB: So, with all... I...I wanna look a--like, a lot of what we talked about as context and now ask about with all these issues that we've analyzed so far, like, can you talk about the ways that DHDC [Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation] is organizing in response to these issues proactively?

AR: Yeah, so, like I mentioned before, we embed--we've always embedded activism in...in everything that we do with our services, but we actually have a community organizing department that has been working really actively with making sure that we are doing it at multiple levels. So, a part of it is advocacy. So, me sitting at the table, but a lot of it is helping to give the skills and the resources to parents and to young people to do--to be their own voice.

So, for instance around immigration, we--there's a national movement called [Movimiento] Cosecha that's an immigrant-led movement, and we helped some of the community residents form a chapter here in Detroit and helped them organize a big march that we had for--there's...in Michigan, the push is for driver's license. Immigrants used to be able to have a Michigan driver's license 10 years ago, and then they decided to change that. So, it's pushing back to try to get that changed. So, we had about 1,000 people that came out to march on May 1st for that, but they're also working and organizing it. So last Sunday, they just had a meeting at DHDC with the Cosecha chapters from Ann Arbor [Michigan], Kalamazoo [Michigan], Grand Rapids [Michigan], and Detroit all met together. So, they're creating a statewide plan. So, my staff are helping to staff that and are integrally involved in that.

With education, the same thing. It's helping the parents and the students understand what are the conditions. A lot of our parents don't understand the difference between charters and district schools. For them, they're just all public schools. So, they don't understand there is different systems and how they can open and close the way that they do and what that impact is. So, we're helping them not just to understand the information and the system but helping them, like, prepare a demands of the superintendent for providing bilingual services in our community. For how do they want to address the school closing and holding people accountable, who are the people to hold accountable for that. So, helping them develop getting that information and the skills and supporting them in doing that kind of organizing is really important for us.

Environmental justice is another huge issue in our community. So, working with community residents and peop--folks at the University of Michigan School of Public Health so we get the data. Having that information and the data is critically important because otherwise we're just talking, right? But if we can say, "These are the facts. This is the information that we have. We can prove that," that's much more powerful.

[1:16:15]

PB: Is there a particular, like, project or initiative that's going on right now that you're particularly excited about?

AR: Yeah. We're actually looking at working with other Latino organizations from across the state of Michigan to develop a statewide agenda. Particularly, we're looking at what's--the census is really important because redistricting is kind of based on the census, and then redistricting has a lot to do with who's in power, right? And, the whole thing of whether or not there is gonna be a citizenship question on the census is--we're waiting to see what's gonna happen with that and what would our messaging be if it is, because my fear is that even though you don--that that information is supposedly is not shared with, say, ICE, the information is very public. So, if you can--anybody can pull up census data, and if you identify the census track that has a large concentration of non-citizens, enforcement can be focused there, right? So, what's the message that we tell people? Is it safe to fill it out? Is it not? Should you fill out the census questionnaire or not? Should I say if I'm a citizen or not? So, all of those things are things that we are now looking at, and then trying to see how do we empower and help...help other communities that are used to only doing---providing services also become active in community organizing and social movements, and what's the message that we can collectively give for our communities?

[1:17:47]

PB: Did DHDC have any involvement in the CBA [Community Benefits Agreement] struggle around the train station building?

AR: With the train station, a little bit more. We've been more actively involved with the second bridge. We're part of the community advisor group and work with the community benefits--Southwest Community Benefits Coalition on negotiating those community benefits, which is a bit--are different than what's the city community CBA agreement is. We've actually--because it's international, we've had more latitude to push for more.

PB: Can you talk a little bit more about that? Like, what's your commission for, and what's the process?

AR: Yeah. It's been a really interesting process because this has been like a 15 year struggle with this second bridge--which we still don't even know why we need a second bridge, but okay--and we knew early on that in spite of them saying that they were looking at different options that it was gonna end up in Southwest Detroit. So, it's really devastated the community around that area especially in Delray because people have just been sitting waiting and not knowing what was gonna happen, and that's a particularly poor community, and--like, most people couldn't qualify for things like home repairs. So, you've got your roof leaking, and your furnace doesn't work, and there's mold in the house, and they don't qualify for the emergency repair program because they don't have insurance. There's not enough money to really make a difference.

We...we were able to work with a University of Michigan on doing some community-based participatory research to get a lot of data around cumulative impact of what was happening in our community in terms of health and the air quality and were able to collectively present that as part of our case to the state, the city, and the international bridge authority. And as a result, we were able to win about 41 million dollars in community benefits collectively. And now, the bridge authority just announced another pot of...I think it's about 10 million, so. The bad thing is they won't directly put anything into health issues because they would have to admit then that there was going to be a health impact, and the EIS--the environmental impact study--said there would not be, that it would actually make things better. [laughs]

So, we've...we--with the city, there's a housing swap program with the land banks. So, anybody who lives in Delray or in 150 feet north of the freeway--because they are also expanding the service drives and putting ramps, like, over 40 feet in the air by the community going to this bridge--they're eligible for a housing swap that the city would buy, take over their house, and they would get a house that would be renovated by the city and land bank. The problem had been is that a lot of those houses are not in Southwest Detroit. They're in other parts of the city. So, not everybody wants to move out of their community. And then, when--the other struggle was that a lot of the houses are smaller. So, we have big families. So,

trying to find a house that will fit a big family has also been a bit of a challenge, but we've had...I think it's 12 families so far have moved, and there's another like maybe 30 on the hopper that will be able to get into another house, and they've been able to find a few in Southwest.

The other thing was that for houses only north--'cause this was something that the mayor agreed to. Not anybody in Delray, but people within 300 feet north of the freeway are eligible for retrofits on their house. So, making sure that they have, like, air filtrations systems or better windows or HVAC [Heating, ventilation, and air conditioning] system so they could filter out some of the bad air before it gets into the houses. Now, this doesn't address the schools and some of the other outdoor areas, but it's something. So, there's a number of other things: jobs, trying to do--give some money to some of the community organizations in the area.

One of the things we did win was a health impact study. So, money that would go to the Health Department for health impact assessment, although they couldn't say it was for the bridge, but we were able to--that's where it happens. So, we had...we were part of conducting the baseline health impact assessment, and there's supposed to be another one that happens during construction and then a couple years after to see what the impacts are on people's health with the air quality. And already with the baseline initially, there's really bad air health impacts, so we'll see what happens. And, the study also showed that if you were to improve the air quality and the most impacted, even to like, say, what's 1500 feet away, that we would save a number of deaths--of lives that would be...we would reduce the number of deaths in the area, so.

[1:22:57]

PB: Do you see connections between, like, this way with gentrification, the displacement has taken place for the bridge, and like the destruction of Mexican Town like for the highway and the Bagley Bridge?

AR: Yeah, it's all it's all part of... I said that there were people who have had plans for 50 years for our community. We're on the water, on the freeways with the railroad tracks going right through. So, shipping, freeway, trucking, railroad, all concentrated in the same area of a lot of development. So, there's now another developer who's coming into Delray to put in another transits, kind of all the warehousing and things. He's buying up a bunch of land, too. So, that's really--we believe the plan for Delray is that it just becomes this huge transit center around this international bridge, which will be more trucks into our community because they gotta go get off the free--go somewhere to get there, right, or get to...get to where they're going. So, again, a lot of plans, the only thing in the way are the people who live there.

[1:24:03]

PB: One thing that I was stuck by recently was how...what...during the Fiat-Chrysler CBA on the East side when the land swaps came out, there was such a huge outcry in like Hubbard Richard and elsewhere in Southwest about the land swaps and that Matty Moroun was getting--I guess this is a long-winded way of asking about, like, your experiences or what success you've had in kind of developing interracial or multiracial coalitions, that you've had connecting different struggles in different neighborhoods in the city?

AR: Absolutely. We work really hard at trying to make those connections especially, like, we haven't had a connection between Southwest and the Lower East side as much we have had in other parts of the city quite a bit, but so that people can learn from some of the experiences as well too, and we can support each other. You know, Matty Moroun's all over the city. He's also on the Northeast side of the city around the airports. So, I'm talking to some folks there who said that they were trying to do housing, and they couldn't because the land was owned by Matty Moroun, and he wanted to do another transit center over there for his trucking companies near the city airport.

So, you know, there's a lot of things we can learn from each other and push back, especially holding city council and the mayor accountable for what kind of--those kind of things that are happening, you know. We did have three city council

people, including our own Raquel Castañeda-López, who pushed back on that, and she gets villainized a lot for doing that, and she's really working hard to protect our community. There are some people whose deep pockets no matter what we do seem to be able to win out, and we have not been successful really with much of anything with Matty Moroun. He's one of them.

PB: She was against--the lone voice of the people throughout that whole process?

AR: Yeah, yeah. You know, when--and that's the other thing. If people are perceived to not have much power, especially if you don't vote and you don't have money, those are the things that people mostly look at. Then, your voice gets really dismissed. So, I think that happens a lot.

[1:26:21]

PB: One thing I meant to mention earlier and now it's coming to mind is could you tell me a little bit about how you incorporate Indigenous cultural practices in DHDC, whether that's in programs or services or organizing?

AR: Yeah. And so, it kind of permeates all the way across that we go back to our roots. Our ancestors were very wise people, [laughs] There are things that people are starting to rediscover now that they knew about how to live well with each other and with the earth and raising children. So, there's this saying that with--one of the practices that we use comes from California from El Joven Noble, the National Compadres Network. In the Spanish, it's like, "La cultura cura," and means in English that the culture cures because spirituality and culture are one and the same thing for most people of color. They're embedded with each other.

So, having those rituals and those practices are part of the healing process, but they're also part of reclaiming who we are and understanding where the history and the conditions that we're in that--for young people to understand that they came from a great people of scientists and philosophers and astronomers and

architects and engineers, that their people were not lazy and stupid, it's very empowering for young people to have that understanding.

And then, we talk about trauma too, and trauma doesn't occur, again, in isolation. It occurs because of the conditions that are in your environment, and part of the healing process of understanding those things is for people to be engaged in activism and being able to take those things. And whether it's a protest or voting or whatever that is, it's also part of the healing process. So, we also incorporate those things, and we start with a circle, which is--it's very... The practices are very similar to Afr--ancient African practices as they are in the Americas too. So, it's kind of Pan-American and, in many ways, Pan-African. We use a drum as well for healing because there's actually scientific proof that says if you're talking about traumatic things while there's the beat of the drum which is kind of the heartbeat that it has the same impact on your brain and neurological system as being in therapy. It's healing. The...the drum was the heartbeat of our communities, right? So, we use those kinds of things as a way of acknowledging who we are, healing from those things, and then moving in to taking action to change those kind of things. So, it...it...for us, it's very important.

[1:29:10]

PB: What have been some of the greatest challenges that you faced as an organizer?

AR: It can be very frustrating sometimes because there's so many things happening at the same time. Kinda what I said, like, the Koch brothers who create chaos in the community. So, you're busy trying to figure out what's going on over here. What's happening over there? It's distracting. So, in the meantime, there's this other thing happening back there you're not even aware of. So, trying to figure out how to address all those multiple things that are happening at multiple levels at the same time.

I think the other thing for me, because I've been around for so long, is seeing how far we've gone backwards. Things that we fought so hard for 20 years ago, we're

right back where we started from. In some cases, worse. So, that can be extremely demoralizing, but, you know... So, I tell young people going into this you have to be in this for the long haul because sometimes it doesn't happen in your lifetime. Sometime--hopefully, you can see change, but there's things sometimes... You know, you have to really struggle for and then be vigilant because they can be taken away. Just because you have fought--won that fight that one time doesn't mean that it can't be taken away. We see that happening all over the place, all over the country in just about everything from women's rights to civil rights to even the Brown v. Board of Education that people are questioning whether that was a correct decision. It's just incredible the number of things that have gone backwards, that are being pushed to go backwards. It's frightening that we are in the throes of fascism in our country.

So, I think that...that right now...I think this is... It may even be harder than I think it was in the [19]60s and [19]70s because then there was just such a sense of, you know, we can make a difference, we can change things. And now, it's...it's so overwhelming in so many different areas. And maybe because I been around for a while, seeing it go backwards, it becomes a little bit harder sometimes. So, what gives me hope though is--are the young people who I see coming up who have that same passion and knowledge, and that it's changing even around the world. The millennials that everyone complains about? They're my hope.

[1:31:36]

PB: And, that's a good segue to ask my final question which is what's your vision for the future of Detroit that really guides your work?

AR: My first hope is that the people who have been here all along living and struggling can still afford to stay here and will have a rich, healthy life that gives them and their children and their families all the things that they need and deserve. I think that that's really the ultimate goal, that we have this community with its richness and all the different cultures and people that we have. There--people from Detroit have a tremendous amount of tenacity and don't give up easily and are not afraid to speak out, and I think that's one of the things I'm very proud of for--and I'm talking about Detroiters as a whole. It's--we work really

hard and don't give up easily, and I think that that's something that a lot of people who come from outside of Detroit don't realize until they get here. And then, they're like, "Oh my God! These people! What are they saying?" [laughs]

So, having--building on those things, and my hope is that the people who have power in the city, elected power, economic power, understand that there are people who have a different kind of power that comes from the people that know what it would take to really make the city a better place, and that they listen to those people, pay attention to them, and follow their advice.

PB: Is there anything that we missed that you wanna get on the record?

AR: I can't think of anything! [laughs] We covered a lot of ground!

PB: Okay. Well, thank you so much!

AR: You're welcome.