

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

Debra Taylor

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER

March 22, 2019

Detroit, Michigan

Narrator

Debra Taylor was born and raised in Flint, Michigan and grew up in a blue collar family. She obtained a Master's in Public Administration from Central Michigan University. Debra has worked for a variety of nonprofits and foundations in Flint, Washington D.C., and Detroit, Michigan, including the Detroit Youth Foundation. She was also a staffer for Detroit City Council member JoAnn Watson. Debra Taylor is a co-founder of the nonprofit organization We the People of Detroit as well as a member of the Detroit Equity Action Lab.

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

Debra Taylor discusses her family background, what Detroit was like when she first moved there, and her career working at non-profits in Flint, Washington, D.C., and Detroit, including the Franklin-Wright Settlement House and the Detroit Youth Foundation. She explains why she became more politically active around 2009, why she volunteered for Detroit mayoral candidate Tom Barrow, and how watching the electoral political process closely shattered her illusions about democracy in Detroit. Another topic is how she and Monica Lewis-Patrick came to work for Detroit City Council member JoAnn Watson and the experiences that they had at that job. She talks about how We the People of Detroit was formed, who was involved, how they shifted to a solutions-based approach, the development of the Community Research Collective, and their various initiatives. She talks about why she believes emergency management was imposed, why she believes the bankruptcy didn't have to happen, and how emergency management connects the Detroit water shutoffs and the Flint water crisis. Themes throughout include the importance of intergenerational organizing, the importance of learning from the community that one is organizing, and the importance of the community rather than academics driving the research agenda.

Keywords

Cecily McClellan; Detroit bankruptcy; Detroit Public Schools; Detroit Water and Sewerage Department; Detroit Youth Foundation; Detroit, Michigan; Dexter-Elmhurst Center; Education; Emergency management; Flint water crisis; Flint, Michigan; Foreclosure crisis; Franklin-Wright Settlement House; Helen Moore; Jones Day; Journalism; Lila Cabbil; Monica Lewis-Patrick; Privatization; Tawana Petty; Tom Barrow; Water shutoffs; We the People of Detroit

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Transcript of interview conducted March 22, 2019 with:

Debra Taylor [DT]

Detroit, Michigan

By: Peter Blackmer [PB]

DT: My name is Debra Taylor, and I live in the city of Detroit [Michigan] in an area that seems to be highly popular nowadays, Lafayette Park, and I am a co-founder of We the People of Detroit, which began as a grassroots organization, which is now a non-profit. That's my primary affiliation in addition to, of course, being a member of Detroit Equity Action Lab, who happens to be sponsoring this venture.

[0:00:49]

PB: So, before we get into more current topics, could you just describe the city for us when you got here?

DT: The first time, after college?

PB: Mhm.

DT: Detroit felt like my city. Even though it had the label of being the murder capital of the world, it was my oyster. I was right out of Michigan State [University]. I liked to listen to jazz and go to concerts and hit Greektown, and...and I lived in almost every part of the city. And, of course, being a young

person, I did a lot of my social partying with friends and just really enjoyed the space and the place. Was active in my church, also. And, Coleman Young was there at the time, the honorable Coleman Alexander Young, who was born on the same day--I was born on his birthday, May 24. I have a lot of respect for his strength, for his intellect, and for his vision for the city, even when the city was heavily redlined and racially divided, which was also on the heels of the 1967 rebellion.

So, the--then, I left Detroit, moved to [Washington] D.C. I'm originally from Flint, Michigan. I returned to Flint in [19]92, lived there, worked for foundations, moved back to Detroit almost 20 years ago working for another foundation [Detroit Youth Foundation] running the Youth Leadership Training Program. And, I just would describe myself--as a kid told me years ago, "Well, Ms. Taylor, you just do good in the hood." So, most of my employment has been trying to contribute to improving the quality of life for our people.

And so, I've worked at settlement houses and different aspects of nonprofits. When I worked at Franklin Wright Settlement House right out of college in the [19]80s, I was responsible for the candidates nights and Coleman Young and Maryann Mahaffey and Mel Ravitz and Clyde Cleveland and all those old timers. We gave--we hosted one of the largest candidates nights in the city, and that's when candidates would come out and actually engage with the community. You didn't have to fill out a form so that they screened your questions. It was an active interaction, real authentic interaction, and you got to see them perform on the spot and get the questions that were important to you answered by people who said they wanted to represent you and to serve you as a public servant--which you don't hear that word anymore. You hear politician, you don't hear public servant. Even the language has changed in what we're looking at today.

And so, I learned a lot as a young upstart, worked really hard. And then when I returned to Detroit in 2000, I was buried in the work that I was doing for Detroit Youth Foundation running a youth leadership training program for adults and for youth and also running their grant making program, which was funded through the Kellogg Foundation. I was buried in my work, and I didn't really pay attention to political things because I was so busy building this program and running it. And then, I got downsized. There were financial problems with the foundation, and I

had a little more time on my hands, and I was questioning different things in a different way, paying more attention to the newspaper.

And, I saw where the whole issue around Kwame Kilpatrick flaring up and Jennifer Granholm, the governor at that time, intervened and--through some process--to ask him to step down. Then all of the sudden, this Dave Bing comes on the scene as a candidate, who I'm not even sure really lived in the city at that time. I think he lived in Franklin [Michigan] somewhere. I started paying attention, and what bothered me was that they said that there would be no debate for the mayoral race, but yet they televised about 30-some candidates to debate on mainstream network TV for weeks in a row, and it bothered me. I said, "It's not what they're saying, it's what they're not saying." And, I started looking at things a little differently. I said, "Why wouldn't--don't Detroiters deserve to hear from the people that say that they want to be their leader to serve them, to direct a major city like this? And there's going to be no debate?" And I said, "Something's not right with this." And, going back to my experience working for the Settlement House where there was engagement, and it was just anticipated, expected, and the given lay of the land.

[0:07:08]

And so, I sent an email to my previous boss, which--the organization that I'd been downsized from--saying--and I sent it to several people--and said, "Don't Detroiters deserve to hear a mayoral debate from the people who say they want to serve them and be in that position?" And, I sent it to different movers and shakers, in my mind, that I knew and had access to, and only two of them out of about 30 gave me a response, and one was a good friend of mine who ran the teacher's union at that time that was being taken--that they were being taken over at that time--and the other, my boss, said--and I said, "Who do you support?" to all of them or something, and she said, "Brenda Lawrence," because she lived in Southfield.

And so, I started to pay attention, watch the Sunday political programs, and I saw Nolan Finley and Stephen Henderson interviewing a mayoral candidate, Tom Barrow. They were throwing these hard questions at him, and he was responding

in a way that I felt was substantive, that was strong, that was grounded in self-determination and self-governance, and with intellect and experience. And, I saw at the end where they asked him a question, and he responded, and both of them looked like they had saw a deer in headlights or something. They...they were thrown off, and I said, "I've got to find this guy, and I've got to go help him," and I found his campaign office, and that opened up a whole new world for me because I hadn't called myself an activist before that. I just always had been a person for the underdog who wanted to, you know, do good in the hood. [laughs]

And so, that opened up a whole new world for me in Detroit, and I learned more about public administration and elections than I did in my whole Master's in Public Administration at Central Michigan University through that process, and can't--learn to canvas the vote. Then, worked on a recount and saw that as much as--I don't think I've ever missed an election--that the election process in Detroit was compromised, and I was just... I felt as though my pink-colored glasses, my rose-colored glasses, had just been stomped [stomps with feet] in the ground. [stomping continues] I believed my ninth-grade Civics class. I believed in democracy. I still believe in the concept.

So, the way I saw Detroit when I came as a young person the first time--and I'd been here as a child because I had relatives here that we visited and hung out with as a kid. And then, coming back after being downsized, a new filter, a new experience. I had a privilege. You know, I worked hard, but I had a privileged kind of background. I'm a blue-collar girl, grew up--my dad was a union man. Both my parents worked in GM [General Motors]. The rest of my family did. But, I, you know, was the first to graduate from college and...you know, struggled, whatever, and worked hard to--and had some opportunities, but my heart is blue collar. That's who I am. That's where I came from. And so, I remember a friend of mine, who just passed, when I worked with him in [Washington] D.C., he said--I was a Division Head for a Human Services Division, and we had a human--we had a historic preservation project which we were doing, archaeological dig at the dairy farms which used to be the Freedman's Bureau after slavery, and there were several other programs that were in this division, and I had to deal with the union, and it was so funny because I was his supervisor, but he really knew more about this topic than I did. And, we would get in discussions, and he was saying, "Now, what are you? Management, or are you blue collar? You...you...you..." and he was

more white collar, and I was actually, in mentality-wise, you know, more blue collar.

But--so, that opened up a whole new thing. I've worked on a couple of recounts. I've seen some things in this city that are disturbing, and I also saw at the same time of the takeover of the City of Detroit--which has been a process--that there...there's some things that are quite questionable in terms of whether they're legal--definitely not ethical. And, it's been a multi-layered process. There was something else I was going to say, and I lost that thought, but you can redirect me if you want, or I can keep going.

[0:13:02]

PB: Can I ask you a question?

DT: Yes.

PB: I want to ask you a question about this process of political education as an awakening you're describing.

DT: Mhm, yes.

PB: Could you kind of just walk us through who some of your influences were or what some of your--who you were listening to or reading or... You know, who is shaping that awakening and that analysis that you're building?

DT: Well, I think I always had a gut feeling that there's some sort of class control issues and mechanisms in place in society, and, as I said, I came from a union background. So, your perspective, you know--the sit-down strike, I mean, it was before I was born, but it had an impact on how people functioned and thought of the older people, you know, growing up under them. And, I think that having more

time to investigate things--so, what I did was I contacted my friend Monica Lewis-Patrick, who had just relocated here with her children, and they were in the Detroit Public School system, and I said, "Hey, they're talking about turning over the school system to the--to Bing, to Mayor Bing. He's not doing a great job with the city, and he's going to take the school district, too? What? What's--really? We need to go down here and see what's going on."

And so, it was having more time on my hands and saying let's get engaged, and that was an area that I felt with my leadership program that was a void that I had not cultivated and developed, which was the civic engagement around government and being engaged in teaching the young people around getting down to the city council meetings and going to the committee meetings and--'cause my dad, I used to go with him as a little kid. So, it was the example of all that. And so, we went, and we listened. And then, there was an opportunity for public comment, and we asked questions or made comments. And then, we recruited other people. And then, there were other people down there that had concerns, and we got to know them, and it grew from there.

And actually, I remember sitting at the city council table during public comment making my comment, and then they shut you off, you know, and they were like, "Who are you all?" 'Cause we were showing up every day, every day for weeks. And, we weren't a group. We were just interested, concerned citizens. But, I felt like we needed to give them more than that because that's not what they were looking for. So, off the top of my head, I said, "We're We the People of Detroit." [laughs] And, that's how our name for our organization came about, and we just...we won that, that battle at that time right around 200...8, it was. We won that, that battle.

But, the newspapers weren't--see, part of the thing with the bankruptcy and the takeover of the city of Detroit is that Kevyn Orr--with a "y," Kevyn with a "y"--was a partner with Jones Day, and Jones Day's main clients, being the second-largest law firm in the world, are the newspapers and the banks. And so, what was happening was by us going down to city council like that, I think it encouraged a woman that you just interviewed, the honorable Councilmember JoAnn Watson, and she reached out to Monica [Lewis-Patrick] and myself and wanted to meet with us. And, we didn't know why, so we were like, "Well, what's the nature of the

meeting?” And she said, “Ah...to...just...” I can’t remember the response, her response, but it was a general one. Monica went because I got sick. And then, we revisited Councilmembers’ office, and she offered us a contract to work for her at that time.

So, that really, really, opened up my eyes because we had documents, access to documents. We were in closed sessions. I saw the--I remember thinking--I had been reading in the [19]80s about these hostile corporate takeovers and thinking, “Wow, what must that feel like? What is that?” You know. And then, by working for city council under Councilmember JoAnn Watson, who was the primary council person who was standing up, fighting, for the citizens of Detroit valiantly, and not only that, but with knowledge and wisdom and history. And, she was a speed reader, so she could outread all of them at the table, and she had a photographic memory. So, it was just amazing to watch her function, and I noticed that the other council people staff--because all of the council people would sit at the inner table and the staff that--their staff would sit at the table behind them, and there was like a first table and a second table. Usually, Monica was at the first table, I was at the second table. And, it was just, you know, amazing to see. Like, we got the same agendas that the public got, Councilmember Watson’s staff did. But, I noticed that some of the sellout council people, their staff had color-coded things that told them when to make a motion and what to say--and we were running around doing all our own research! And, we had inferior equipment. The Wi-fi would go out or--I mean, it was interesting. They had the best stuff, you know? [laughs]

And so, it was real clear we were in the midst of a hostile corporate takeover by the State of Michigan. And so, I got so good with it, I said, “Monica”--when we would get certain memos or certain actions or quick meetings that weren’t planned that we had to rush to. They create emergencies intentionally to create crises, like Naomi Klein’s *Disaster Capitalism* [The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism], the whole theory of that book. And so, you know, you run into this, you run into that, and it was like... I said, you know--I started predicting headlines based on what was happening behind the scenes of what the state was going to say, what the [Detroit] Free Press and the [Detroit] News--and it was like clockwork. We got so good at it. And so, it was--we were like working two jobs. We worked for the Councilmember during the day, and then we’d go meet with the conscious people who were against the takeover of the City of Detroit to...to

discuss what was going on. And then, you know, so it just became a peeling back of the layers of this hostile takeover.

And, it didn't start with emergency management. It was multifaceted. Like, the Department of Human Services that was a 60 million dollar department that had been in existence for 50 years to help Detroiters with emergency needs to prevent water shut offs, to prevent utility shut offs, to repair roofs that needed repairing for weatherization and all that. We were in these meetings with Gary Brown, who now has been--now the director of the Department of Water and Sewage department, because Bing was going to give that department to privatize that 60 million dollars to give to Salvation Army and Wayne Metro [Community Action Agency], who didn't even serve inner city of Detroit, didn't want to. But then, those funds that had been developed--and those funds were funds that I say were built on the misery index of Detroiters, poverty, unemployment, etcetera. Those funds got spread out so that all of Wayne County [Michigan] now got access to that, and Detroiters got less and less and less, and the barriers of how to access those funds was through a phone call that I've held eight hours because we used to call--that's how we found We the People of Detroit. That's how we set up the water rights hotline and water stations. We were called to a meeting. Monica and I went. It was by Michigan Welfare Rights [Organization] and the People's Water Board, and it was a community crisis meeting call, and we were called probably because of the work we had done with Councilmember Watson. Because at that point, we didn't have a formal organization. We had registered with the state to be a domestic non-profit.

[0:23:20]

And, it was like, what are we going to do? And so, Monica decided--I think NetRoots [Nation] conference was coming here. That was the July...it was before then. It was that spring. 2014, I think it was, after the takeov--after the bankruptcy. And, she volunteered to--we thought it was going to be maybe a month or two of doing emergency water relief. We had no grant funding or anything. We were charging on my charge card, you know, to get water and clipboards and vests, and we're like, "I hope we can find a way to pay this off [laughs]," you know? And so--what is this? [20]14, [20]15, [20]16, [20]17, [20]18, [20]19--six years later, we're still doing emergency water relief. We set up the

Water Rights Hotline and--to help people navigate the resources and to navigate with the Department of Water and Sewage. But, my point is that the safety net was the Department of Human Services allowing and supporting Detroiters to stabilize their lives with the basic essentials, housing, etcetera.

I remember getting a call from a senior who was 80 or 90, and they were panicked because workmen had started to do work on her roof, and it was a big hole, and it was still kind of winter or, you know, cold, and the state contacted the contractors that were contracted with the City of Detroit's Home Repair Program and told them they weren't going to be paid and to stop work. So, they left people with plumbing problems, roof problems--elderly people--and went around the City to do this. So, we saw all kinds of things that could make you really, really angry--and know that--and none of it was getting any headlines except for this newspaper here [holds up copy of the Michigan Citizen], which no longer exists, which suddenly just went away one December with no real notice, the Michigan Citizen, and here you can see [reads off of newspaper], "Orr's Cuts Devastates Retirees."

And so, it was like we didn't--we were doing little flyers that weren't professional because we didn't have--I mean, you know. Trying to get information out to people because the main media--they're just starting to tell the truth because everything--now, you can't unscramble the egg. That's what the judge says, you know. Even when you win a lawsuit or whatever, the damage is done, and a lot of times there's no restitution, like the 100,000 illegally-foreclosed-on houses that people worked to develop. The ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] filed the claim. Dr. Bernadette [Atuahene] did the research, and she had-- she was new to town, so she had people like Monica Lewis-Patrick and others who were helping her understand the community and put the pieces together of the strategy. And then, you--you all's' mayor [Mike Duggan] kind of made a pose with a couple of people to make it look like it was his idea to help people get housing, and it wasn't done properly. So, you know, there are a lot of layers to this whole thing, and I think that the...the media is just really coming around, but it's sort of late. You know, Bridge Magazine is now doing things, and there are others. But at the time, nobody was telling to the truth.

But, Jones Day law firm, as I said, the second-largest law firm in the world, its main clients were the newspapers and the banks, and the banks were the ones who benefited most from the bankruptcy. And so, Wallace Turbeville, who had been a stock--worked on Wall Street with Goldman Sachs came to--flew to Detroit on his own dime during one of the days of the bankruptcy proceedings under Judge [Steven] Rhodes to give professional expert testimony around why the bankruptcy was unnecessary and how the debt could be reduced for the Water Department, and the judge never called on him, and he had to catch his plane back to New York. Now suddenly a few years later, Turbeville dies, and it's sort of, like, questionable about his death. I tried to do some research to see what they say and why--'cause he wasn't an old guy. I was on the panel with him, with Dr. Peter Hammer, did a special session called After the Bankruptcy. I think it was 2013 at Wayne State University, and Turbeville was one of the people on one of the panels. And so, it was mysterious to me. I'll put it like that.

But, he had some stuff out there, reports, the Demos Report--D-E-M-O-S--that basically talks about the fact that the bankruptcy was unnecessary, and he talks about the interest rates flop deal that happened in 20...05, [20]06, [20]07--I think it was [200]5 and [200]6--under Kwame Kilpatrick that set the City up for these unbelievable interest rates if certain things happened, and one of the things that had to happen was the imposition of an emergency manager. So, they were determined. They would come high or hell water--come high or hell water? However it goes--come hell or high water to file that bankruptcy and have that emergency manager. Because Detroit--and I'm sure Councilmember Watson said this to you--Detroit didn't declare bankruptcy. Governor [Rick] Snyder did under...by...through an unelected public official appointee named Kevyn Orr...eo. [laughs]

And so, what that did was caused almost 50 percent of the revenue for the Water Department to go towards interest to the banks, not towards the infrastructure and the pensions that it should have gone to. 40 percent of the 3.5 billion of the pensions should have been come out of that revenue. So, [laughs] what ended up happening is for We the People--if you want to ask me a question, that's fine.

[0:30:53]

PB: Can I jump in?

DT: You can.

PB: We know what the newspapers said.

DT: Yeah.

PB: We know what the politicians said about why Detroit was placed under emergency management.

DT: Right.

PB: That...that is...that narrative is out there.

DT: Right.

PB: From your perspective, if we're going on the record and just, like, just laying it bare, ...

DT: Yeah.

PB: ...why was Detroit placed under emergency management?

DT: Detroit was placed under emergency management because it is strategically located on 21 percent of the world's freshwater supply, surface water supply, because it is an international border, because there are those that we know that

future wars in this world are going to be fought over the shortage of water, because people of financial means, the 1 percent, want this to be their playground, they want access to water, and they want to change the...the complexion of the city from Black and brown people to white and wealthy people.

PB: So...

DT: And, to legally steal assets. Belle Isle, Water Department. Great Lakes Water Authority popped up quickly, and that started under [Dave] Bing because of what--I think...I think that--and I've told Dr. [Peter] Hammer this--I think the Great Lakes Water Authority is an illegitimate entity. I think that it...well, actually, even the consent agreement that was signed on April 4, 2012 that was supposed to be a five year agreement to avoid the emergency manager, and I don't think it lived but a few months, was also a very questionable--because what we know from the way that those meetings happened--and, you know, they scheduled meetings at times when we weren't supposed to have the meeting and places where we weren't supposed to have them and then have them back-to-back so we had to run from State Building back down to the City-County building and supposedly people signed documents and hadn't even read them but--there are different signatures on different documents. That has never been talked about and--to give the City away...

So, I think that the City is valuable. I think that, like, the DIA [Detroit Institute of the Arts] and the [Detroit-Windsor] Tunnel and the parking that the City owned, all the revenue-generating call centers were things that were given away to friends and family, you know, and that's the same with DPS [Detroit Public Schools] and the school system. We have a book coming out in the next few months that's going to be twice the--I can talk about this too--twice the size of the...this [holds up book *Mapping the Water Crisis*] called *Mapping the Education Crisis*, and it's going to track the money, and people are going to see what really happened.

And so at the bankruptcy proceeding, Monica [Lewis-Patrick] asked Judge [Steven] Rhodes if he would put a moratorium on the water shutoffs until a health assessment could be made on the health impact on the citizens of the City of

Detroit, and he basically said something--I think it was Rhodes, or it might have been [Judge] Rosen (ph) [it was Steven Rhodes]--but he said something to the effect that, "I know that there will be imminent danger and harm to many, but it's more important that this bankruptcy be a success," and she came back hot, mad. Now, here we are going door-to-door. We're rag-tag teams, giving people kicker cards saying, "We have some emergency water. Are the people shut off on your block?"--'cause the City's not giving information--and recruiting people to go with us, and she comes back and says, "We got to do our own research. They are, you know, on the health impact--we got to do..." And so, that's how we--no money, no nothing. We pulled together a group of academicians and whatever and came up with this book that's now used in about 17 different universities. It's been used in K-12. It's been the basis of a recent report by the Haas Institute [for a Fair and Inclusive Society], *Water [Equity and] Security in Detroit's Water and Sewer District*.

So, you know, it's been in divine order, the things that we've done. We feel that we've been spirit-led, and we're standing for what we believe in and what we believe is right, and it's just been an interesting journey.

[0:36:10]

PB: I want to come back to water specifically in a little bit.

DT: Okay.

PB: But, I also want to get on...hear you talk a little bit about the formation of We the People.

DT: Ah.

PB: You mentioned you're coming out of the council meetings, but put me in the room where the organization is forming. What does that look like? What are the conversations? Who is there?

DT: It's more organic than that. We had a rag-tag team of activists--what was that? Free Detroit, No Consent, members of different organizations, [inaudible] Block Club, Val Burris, a gentleman by the name of Tyrone [Travis??]...Tyrone--it's not Davis. [laughs] I can't remember--but, he was like an elder who had been tracking this takeover from the--since the [19]70s when the plans were being laid, way back. So, we had that historic context where he educated us--Tyrone, I'm sorry for not remembering your last name if you're watching this. [laughs] And, we secretly met at a union office, and we had an initiative or campaign we called "Taking It to the Streets," and what we were trying to do was take information that--some of the things that I'm sharing with you, and we thought that if people knew what was really going on, they would stand up more, they would, you know, they would push back, you know. And so, that was sort of ground zero work during the time we were working at city council. And then, I think after the bankruptcy and once we started--well, we also lost our jobs as a result of the emergency manager.

So, the five co-founders of We the People of Detroit are all women of color. Our elder is 88 years old now. And then, she [Phyllis "Chris" Griffith] founded the first methadone clinic for the Health Department for the city years ago because she found her son was addicted when she went in his bedroom, and...and she founded that. I'm just sort of giving you a little background. The other woman has been an activist since she was a teenager. She was part of the Black liberation movement as a teenager and a part of the BCN [Black Christian Nationalist] Black cultural movement back in the day and a union vice president, very intelligent woman, who also--Cecily McClellan--who also ran and developed the Water Assistance Program for the City of Detroit, who now runs our Water Rights Hotline. Then, there's myself who has 30 plus years in human services, leadership development, youth development. Then, Monica Lewis-Patrick, who has a mental health background and managing mental health and a criminal justice background, etcetera.

We got together. We had a little spot we used to go where we didn't have to see the gentrifiers--they have that now, so we don't have that spot anymore--where

we could go eat and talk freely and said, “Okay, now that we see that they’re just going to take the stuff whether it’s legal or not, what do we do?” So, we said, “We build. We equip. We work in coalition,” and part of that has to be young people. Part of it has to be creating a pipeline so this thing outlives us. And since we used to fund everything out of our own pockets when we had jobs, before we lost our jobs--we had to retire early because of the emergency manager--we have to find some resources to continue the work. And, with me having a human service background in foundation--working for various foundations, community foundation, private foundation, Detroit Youth Foundation--we can start looking at how we can do this. And so, Monica says, “Why don’t we go on, and what do you all think about us, you know, applying to be a non-profit?” We had the discussion. We agreed that it was probably a route to go, and we did it with the state, and then we did it in--we’ve been around going on 10 years now this year, but our non-profit status with the IRS [Internal Revenue Service] has been since...effective May of 2015.

So, we continued the water relief. We cont--we formed the collective, the Citizen’s Research Collective, and things were organic because some of the people that came brought skills we didn’t have, but they were with the agenda, with the mission. And, I think what was unique about the Community Research Collective is that while we partnered with academicians, we did not partner with the universities to allow them to own our data. We held and owned the data on behalf of the community. And so, that empowered--it made the research being driven by the needs of the community and not the community being research lab rats for academia.

So then, it was just a lot of work, a lot more work. And then, you have a lot more accountability and reports. It’s like I used to be at a lot more rallies than I’m at nowadays and meetings, community meetings, but there’s a lot of administrative work that has to be done too. And when you can't pay people because you don’t have money, then you have to do the work. You may have to do three and four peoples’ jobs just to get it done because it’s taken sweat equity to get to this point.

[0:43:00]

PB: So, could you--I want to come to the water a little bit in terms of like the organizing ethos and the work that you're putting in. Could you walk me through what those days when you're going out and handing out the kicker cards and what those conversations were sounding like at the doors of peoples' homes?

DT: I remember our first water station was set up at Dexter-Elmhurst Center where Mother Helen Moore, Queen Mother Helen Moore, runs, and we--the building had...was in disrepair. And so, we were able to join with Will Copeland--I can't remember the name of the organization [Our Power Detroit]. It was a national connection of young people who were coming to learn about community organizing and to do service. And so, we coordinated with them and with our own networks, other networks, to clean up and fix up that center so that it could be used because it...it had water damage and this and that and, you know, dirty and litter and in an alley. So, we got that all shiney-ed up and had a little ceremony and worked really hard to get it going and whatever.

And, there were quite a few water shutoffs in that area. And so, what we basically did was we wanted to provide a resource. We didn't want to come empty-handed. So, it's like if we found somebody that didn't have running water, we wanted the message on that kicker card to say, "Hey, call the Water Rights Hotline," or if you're in danger of having your water shut off, and we'll try to help you. But, we also came to learn with a teachable spirit, like, to teach ourselves because the city wasn't sharing where they were shutting off. Just like Homrich here, Homrich there, shutting people off. It was the same company that Dan Gilbert--you know, the Blight Commission, they were working in--you know, they were the demolition crowd people, but yet they were getting information. I mean, they were getting contracts to cut peoples' water off.

And so, the conversation was more of a teachable--it was a give and take. It was not, I'm up here, and you're down here, and this is just social service delivery. This is like, we're here. We're part of the community. We're concerned about the crisis, too, and because we don't have a way to get feedback and information from the city, we're coming out as volunteers to see if you have water in your home, in the community, and if it's needed and if you know if there are others in the community. And, some of the people never came to the door, which is

understandable. And then, some people came cussing. [laughs] “What the [makes bleeping noise].” And, you know, we were prepared for that, too. But then, there were others who saw that we were genuine, and that they were...might have had water themselves but were concerned about their neighbor.

I remember activist-poet Tawana Petty working with us and going door-to-door, and Monica was about to cry because she saw a water hose flowing from this elderly woman’s home to her neighbor’s home and thinking, “Oh God, that’s so sad,” and Tawana Petty was like, “No, that’s not sad, not really, because Detroiters are beloved. We share. We love each other. We give each other. We meet each other’s needs.” And, it changed Monica’s perspective, and we sort of coined this thing called ‘the Beloved Community.’ Despite the inequities, despite the wrong injustices that had been done, we’re still gonna show love.

[0:47:25]

PB: So, I guess that leads to--I mean, the logical question there is: what’s the connection between the work that y’all are doing around water shutoffs and the water crisis to past struggles? I’m thinking particularly about Dr. [Martin Luther] King’s influence with the beloved community.

DT: Mmhmm.

PB: So, how do you view yourself as We the People at this current moment in Detroit? How do you view its connection to the Civil Rights movement and the longer struggles dating back to...

DT: It’s a continuation of the same family cut from the same cloth, just wanting justice and freedom, you know. And, I would say that what we have done--because we were really considered radical. You could probably find some videos out there that are pretty radical in terms of just being straight up, no-chasing, telling the truth and calling things out, and people weren't doing that because they want a job, [laughs] you know. But, I think that we’ve shifted some

and matured, not that we still don't--we still feel the way that we feel and have the analysis that we have, but I think we've turned a corner in terms of understanding that you gotta go to the table with people who don't think like you if you're gonna get solutions. You've gotta go wherever there's the possibility to make this thing better.

So, for example, I think we've become--before, we were trying to expose and educate, and it's not that we aren't trying to do that now, but now we're looking for solutions because we recognize that it's water under the bridge. You can't unscramble the egg. It's done, and it's not that it won't be exposed or shouldn't be exposed, but it's like: what are the solutions? So, for example, Monica is really the face of the organization out there. Prolific speaker, really gifted, highly intelligent, passionate, all of that. She is--she headed up the statewide water affordability unity table for the design team to look at water affordability as a policy and how we could get it implemented because Michigan State [University] has come out with a report that says in five years--now they've shortened the time--34 percent or so of citizens won't be able to afford their water bill. And, as you know, in Detroit, our water has gone up over the last 10, 12 years over 126 percent.

And so...and you--I hope people understand that the connection between--I didn't fully answer your question, but--the connection between the Flint [Michigan] water crisis and Detroit and understand that--this is not now...this is not We the People saying this, this is Debra Taylor saying this. I believe people like the Koch brothers who fund think tanks like the Cato Institute--C-A-T-O--and other institutes I don't even know the name of perpetuate regressive policies nationwide to repress working class people and to break unions and to break down democracy. Emergency management is anti-democratic. Emergency management has a generic name by the Cato Institute of state intervention laws that are now in 37 different states.

So, what they--emergency management is a tool to dismantle, to... In my opinion, emergency management state intervention laws--they came out of the Cato Institute--are intended to convert public wealth to private wealth. Because the media tells you Detroit was the murder capital of the world, Flint's the poorest per capita, this, that, all the bad news about--but then, how's the same place then

now the greatest thing since sliced bread? The same place. Because who controls the message, the narrative? And so, it's a tool to shake down the wealth, municipal wealth, and privatize things, privatize the water. The water used to be controlled by the people, but they know that it's going to be a worldwide water shortage and greed comes in. The color is greed, but what they do is always use race as a divisive measure, which is what has been done here in Michigan. And, I mean, you know, in terms with emergency management, all the 50-some percent of Black people in Michigan live under--lived under--the control, and they're still the vestiges because they left executive orders by these emergency managers that constrained elected officials from having the authority and power to do the things that would be the best for the citizens and residents of their municipalities.

So, what I see is a breakdown in the system. We see now--like we've been knowing. I was told--I came back here, and I've worked on about three different recounts. And so, I could say, based on what I know, Detroit hasn't elected a mayor since I've been back in 20 years. I'm told by people who've been in the field on this longer than me that we haven't elected one since Coleman Young, and I think he left office in 1994. I don't think any of this would have happened if we had elected our own people.

[0:54:08]

PB: So, I want to...

DT: But, there were a bunch of sellouts who cooperated.

PB: Mmm. I want to come back to that.

DT: Okay.

PB: I want to get your input on...

DT: Okay.

PB: ...on why...why that is.

DT: Mhm.

PB: But, I want to also connect the dots between Flint and Detroit.

DT: Okay.

PB: I've talked to a lot of people outside of the Detroit area. Like, people will text me and say--they'll ask me what the difference is between what's taken place in Detroit and what's taken place in Flint. These crises are looming in other American cities. Like, I came from Newark [New Jersey]. That's on the verge of happening. For people that don't know, ...

DT: Yeah.

PB: ...what's the connection between the water crisis in Detroit and the water crisis in Flint?

DT: Okay, okay. Emergency management is the common denominator. Control both cities. Make the decisions for both cities. Controlled by a governor [Rick Snyder?] who I believe was a Koch-brother-funded super-PAC [Political Action Committee] candidate. And so, it was determined that they want to privatize the Water Department, and they intentionally left the Water Department out of the bankruptcy, which would've reduced the debt of the Water Department. So, if the bankruptcy was to restructure the debt, why'd you leave the biggest asset the city has?--which when Judge [John] Feikens, the federal judge who's been over because of the Clean Water Act back in the [19]70s, said that if Detroit were to sell

the water department, 51 percent of it, or some phenomenal number--and I believe right now the Water Department is worth over 78 billion dollars. And when they did this great forum--the Great Lakes Water Authority--they did this big press conference like we should be happy because they're paying us a lease of 50 million dollars a year when 17 million dollars of it was Detroit's money anyway.

So, the connection with Flint--because Rowe Engineering [Rowe Professional Services Company], I just read--I did some quick cramming, but I didn't have time to do what I really wanted to--but, Rowe Engineering did a study back in...I think it was 2000 and--I don't know--[20]13, [20]14 to say that--to study Flint water for 2 months, they had 150,000 dollars--to say that the water was sufficient for drinking, which everybody in Flint who didn't have a degree knew that dead bodies, cars, GM [General Motors]'s been dumping chemicals in there since 1920 at least, you know, that it was really stupid.

But, so the point--what I'm saying is that emergency managers and the governor were controlling the decisions from both cities, and what emergency management does is suspends democracy, and it takes away all the powers of the elected officials so that they're just placeholders, but the decisions are made by these people who don't live here, who don't care about the people who live here.

And so, Flint was the largest revenue producer for the City of Detroit's Water Department, and it was the furthest away. So, what they did in Flint was lie to the people there to say, "Detroit is gouging us. If we get our own water plant back up, and we get a new pipeline, KWA [Karegnondi Water Authority], then our rates will go down," right? But, they only did it for the core city where most of the Black people lived in Flint. They didn't do it for any of the lily-white suburbs. So then, what they did was they cut them off, cut their revenue stream off to weaken Detroit's Water Department to ripen it for privatization. That's my theory. That's what I believe. That's the connection.

[1:58:19]

PB: So, your--since we're talking about connections, I want to think about the impacts of emergency management on the city of Detroit and the range of crises that it has willfully imposed, from my perspective. So, from where you're standing, what's the connection between the water crisis, the foreclosure crisis, and the crisis in education and the attack on the public schools?

DT: Okay. [sighs] Water debt--well, the foreclosure crisis I think was allowed to happen. I'm not sure if it was intentional, but it was allowed to happen because cities are supposed to reassess properties every so many years. I forgot what it is here in Detroit, but every so many years--I was just in Charlotte [North Carolina], and I think they have to do it every five years. So, I don't know when Detroit's done it last, but everybody knows there was a housing crisis and a financial bank crisis in 2007, 2008 when the bottom almost fell out of everything, and there was--the reassessment would have reduced the property values, which would have reduced the taxes that people had to pay. But because there was no reassessment done properly, 100,000 households lost their--families--lost their homes.

And, you've got to keep this in mind: Detroit in the [19]80s had the highest home ownership values of any place in the country. And, you've got to keep this in mind: Black people in particular have suffered from redlining and all kinds of discriminatory practices and policies since we've been here, but to the extent that--to have that kind of reputation of having the highest Black home ownership in the country was really a better banner of honor because most of people of color, particularly Black people's, wealth comes in home ownership. So, when you allow 100,000 homes and families to lose their primary wealth, their place where their family has been there for generations, the place has been paid off. Some people only owe 350 dollars. Some people only owed 1,000 dollars, you know. And, that was inflated, and it was disproportionately targeted to the lower-income people, the people who wouldn't have the wherewithal to push back.

So, that's the foreclosure piece that then contributes towards blight, contributes toward gentrification, contributes towards a current mayor [Mike Duggan] converting the hardest-hit funds that should've been there to be a safety net to help people repair their homes to be a no-interest loan or to go to the blight fund to not stuff down to give people those contracts. So, that's foreclosure, that's

gentrification, that's a dot to connect. The water debt was also attached illegally to the liens, the tax liens, that contributed toward the same thing. So, that's the connection between housing, water, and a lot of that is--you know, there's some of that that's in here, in this *Mapping the Water Crisis* book.

So, I hope I answered your question to connect the dots on that one. We used to have little flyers when we were, you know, just like grassroots running around, connect the dots, and we were trying to show where [Betsy] DeVos and Blackwater and Koch brothers and [Rick] Snyder, and, you know, there's some elaborate connect-the-dot diagrams around that, you know, aren't published but that people would be shocked to see the connections between institutions, people, and actions.

[1:02:58]

PB: So, when--I just want to pause for a second. Are you okay? Do you want to take a break or anything?

DT: I'm okay.

PB: When you're looking back now over, you know, some of the organizing work that you've talked about, how would you evaluate the successes with the shortcomings of that approach you're describing in terms of educating and informing people, you know, through those flyers and connect the dots though the doorknocking? Could you provide an analysis of, you know, how you think that worked or what the impacts you think...

DT: Yeah. Clearly, it wasn't to the scale that it needed to be, and it...I think it ... What Black people know, and people who are low-income, many know is you make a way out of no way. You use what you have. And so, we used--and we still do. [laughs] It's not like we just arrived, you know. I mean, you make a way out of no way, and you use what you have, and you do better when you know better. And so, what happened that was helpful--and I say this was divine intervention in

the way that we came about being able to be more methodical and research-based because we realized people aren't going to listen to you. They just think you're raising your fists and fussing and cussing and stuff--is to speak the language of the system, right?

And so, Monica met a young woman who was brilliant who was just helping us deliver water, and I met a young woman [Nadia Gaber] who was brilliant at a People's Water board meeting. One was an associate professor in architecture [Emily Kutil] that she met, and the one I met was a Ph.D. at the University of California-Berkeley who knew about the CASPER [Community Assessment for Public Health Emergency Response] project, research project. And so, we had been doing the rag-tag thing and not real methodical or researched-based, just from the heart. And then, this meeting--and I'm listening to this woman who's a Ph.D. candidate, and we were saying, "We need to start listening to the young people more," right. That was kind of part of the conversation. And then, she was trying to get in to say something, and they weren't paying attention to her, and I said, "We just said we want to let young people have a voice, and this young woman is trying to say something. Can we let her speak?" And then, she spoke, and I thought, "It's an answer in there somewhere. It's a solution in it." So, I made sure to get to her after that meeting, gave her my card. We exchanged. We talked.

And so, what ended up happening as a result of that is the CASPER Research Model is used for disaster research by the CDC, the Center for Disease Control. So, what it does is it is a...it's a platf--a research platform that is a--takes a percentage. It's a random sampling that will then give you a scientific result based on this formula, and it would allow us to do a bigger-scale research project being more methodical and get the kind of results that would be city-wide. And so, we...we undertook that, and we trained about 40--we recruited volunteers, explained what we were trying to get accomplished, met over in a training that morning and a breakfast. And for a couple of weekends, we hit the streets with these surveys. And then, she did all the calculations and whatever to look at the impacts. So, as we have been seeking solutions in freedom and equity, the universe has been bringing resources in terms of people, etcetera to hone and perfect, you know, our primitive ways of being and doing. [laughs]

And so, I would say what matters is your intent and to reevaluate and be open to new ideas and techniques and resources and people and not to judge people. The one woman is an Arab woman. The other woman is a white woman who grew up in the suburbs. But, it's not about the color. It's about the intent of the heart because the only color that the system really thinks about is greed.

[1:08:26]

PB: So, I guess in the same vein, I think it's also important that we use this kind of opportunity where we're documenting stories to provide space to offer any advice to folks that might be coming in your footsteps. So, based on the lessons that you've learned in--from your work so far, what advice would you give to either prospective activists who are just getting their feet wet or even seasoned organizers?

DT: [pause] Don't believe your own press. Like, "I'm the best thing since sliced bread," you know. Don't believe your own press. Examine your own heart and your motives of your heart. Have a work ethic and a standard for yourself. Get in where you fit in. Lend your skills and your talents and your abilities and discern...and discern where you need to take them because not everybody that's saying that they're for a certain thing have the motives of heart that match that. Work hard. Study. Read. Listen--that's one I had to learn, I had to really train myself on because I like to talk. But, you really have to really listen...here. And as my pastor--spiritual advisor says, "Listen here and obey the spirit within you, the good spirit within you, the God spirit within you."

And, I think the other thing that is important that--where we have, as a society, we've missed the mark, and we've got to figure out how to recapture--is the intergenerational, the wealth and the strength that forming intergenerational partnerships can bring, because it's all a continuum. I'm not just coming on the scene and starting something. This stuff was here before I was born. It's going to be here when I leave here and the same with all of us. And so, when you enter in, take enough time--you may not think that the person conjugates a verb properly or has the proper credentials or degrees to learn something from, but my opinion

is that I can learn from anybody. I can learn from a child. I can learn from observing a baby's behavior.

And so, I think that we have to be a little more humble, you know, and put this bravado and ego stuff, you know, aside because it's getting real real now. What if...what if they stop distributing food to the grocery stores in the urban areas? What if they block off, you know, those floods that we had under the bridge of the Lodge [Freeway] or whatever? The state control--they didn't know they put--they took away the people from the Water Department, certain places, who understood the jobs, and put other people and cut back, cut back, cut back. They're putting our lives at stake 'cause the new people didn't know how to open up the valves to release the water to get it out of the freeway. So, we have to not make assumptions because I used to be...I used to be a person that was... How can I say it? "Oh, they won't do that. They couldn't do that. They won't do that." They can do that. They might do that. They will do that.

[1:12:51]

PB: So, I guess that logically carries this conversation. We talked about the education forming that mode of organizing.

DT: Mhm.

PB: You talked about that evolution that We the People has gone through to more solutions-based. Can you talk a little bit about that solution-based work that is currently taking place?

DT: Yes. I mentioned one, which was the water affordability piece that we are looking to work--continue to work in collaboration with larger environmental groups, small, local groups, to find a way to make sure that affordable water policies get adopted at local, state, and federal level. And so, our CEO [Chief Executive Officer] Monica just left [Washington] D.C. with a delegation of people testifying to the Department of Energy. We're working on a really exciting project

that is a solution that would create jobs, that would create businesses, that would create revenue, that would...that's...it's called a [inaudible]. And, I may not be able to-- community water, recovery, environmental--I'm not going to remember, but it's a [inaudible]. But basically, it's technology that can purify water and waste and create fertilizer that can be sowed, create jobs for that. They can create grey water for industrial manufacturing. And, I'm missing--oh, thermal energy, hydro energy, and I think it's one other thing.

And so, we already have the technology. We already have the partner. We were in the running for this big grant called A Million and a Change or a Hundred Million and Change [100&Change, a MacArthur Foundation grant?], something like that, and--but, they did more health-based things internationally, so. And so, we're working on that. The challenge is it's a real solution that can work, and the first ones going to be coming up in the Boston [Massachusetts] area probably this year. It's politically going to be--the tough part is politically getting it through because people don't want to change the control, the way things are currently done. But, that's a solution, a technology solution.

We're doing...we've got two more books, and you guys kind of got our theme, water, land, and education, which we defined back in 2013, [20]14 as the series of books and research we would do. So, we've got that second book on *Mapping the Education Crisis* coming out, and that's to educate and set the record straight because nobody's gonna tell you a story like you, you know, and they'll make this stuff go away if we don't tell it, get it documented, whatever. So, this is in the Library of Congress, you know. It's documented that way. And, it's not like we knew all these things. It's like the universe sent what we needed to do it because the wheel was there, and I believe in the right intentions of the heart.

Other solutions... I think the--and we're in the process of rethinking how we're going to do it, but investing in young people. Investing in young people is critical because I'm middle-aged, all the founders pretty much are middle-aged, you know. And so, we don't want it to die when we die. We want it to be a solution and a resource in the community that lives on so that people are empowered, moved, touched, and inspired to make a difference in their own lives.

And so, you know, we've done four summers. We didn't even have money, but we found money, you know, to stipend the people for a month-long internship in the summer. They get Water 101. They do community service. They pick a topic that we don't have anything to do with and that is of interest to them and research it and figure it out how they're going to do it. They do a final--a community project. Sometimes, it's been a film they've done. Sometimes, it's been a play. It's been different, creative ways. And now, we're looking--matter of fact, I've got a conference call with the founders--we're looking at designing and planning a Great Lakes Water Camp for young people, and what we want to do, since we have connections with the other leaders such as ourselves in Illinois, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Michigan, is to bring young people together, and what we will do is a planning retreat of the leaders, and we'll include youth input in that process. So, that's another piece of a solution because if you don't deal with the future and plant seeds in young people then it dies when the people who founded it die.

[1:18:30]

PB: So, say somebody's listening to this interview and they're really excited and inspired by some of these projects that you have going on. How can they get involved? How can people get organized with you?

DT: I would say the best way right now, because, you know, we're still dealing with our own capacity issues, is, for me, I would say go on the website, you know, WeThePeopleofDetroit.com. I would also say, if I knew the Twitter thing--I think is @WeThePeople is the Twitter. I don't do the tweeting. And then, Facebook. Go on Facebook because that is kind of active where we're putting things up sporadically about current events, when we're looking to do water shifts, where we re-fill our water. Water station is St. Peter's [Episcopal] Church or over at Brightmoor. Then, we, you know, need volunteers who maybe have half an hour, forty minutes during their lunch to help shift pallets of water so that--and we need people that can help deliver water, and that's done twice a month on Fridays. So, there's also a phone number to the Water Rights Hotline which is 1-844-42WATER.

[1:20:05]

PB: So, I have two more questions, just in the interest of time. So as not to blindside you, the second question I want to ask is if you have any remembrances or tributes you would like to offer for Mama Lila Cabbil. That's one thing that we would--that we're building into all these interviews to have that kind of compilation. But before we go there, another thing that we're asking everyone is: what's your vision for an equitable Detroit?

DT: My vision for an equitable Detroit is that we would actually get there. [pause] And, that's a vision, [laughs] and it would include an equipped school system with the proper tools, technology, and leadership to prepare them for the future. I think it would look like adoption of affordable water policy--not water assistance, but water--[coughs] excuse me--affordability, which is different. That there would be real training for people to get real... [long pause; coughs] ...living wage jobs so that families can work one job and take care of their families, that the profiling by the Police Department that happens would cease. [pause]

And that--affordable housing for all. That's a problem in the whole country right now. It's in the news and headlines all the time now. So, those would be my--you know, and then families, you know, families could be families and be happy and regardless if you're low-income, middle-income, or high-income, that, you know, there wouldn't be the kind of suffering based on poverty.

[1:22:45]

PB: And, I guess just to leave off the conversation, if there's any kind of--like, a memory or anything that comes to mind that you want to get on...on the record about Mama Lila and her legacies.

DT: I don't refer to her as Mama Lila because we worked together 20 years ago, and I hired her to help with the Retreat for Leadership program 20 years ago. And so, you know, even though she was older than me, I never made that shift to--this has been a more recent thing in the last two years or so. But, we worked together then, and I felt she was an excellent facilitator at that time to help bridge the gap

between young people and the elders for our retreat preparing to go into an 18-month program. And then, we worked together again with Uprooting Racism, Planting Justice project in which she brought me in on that project to coordinate it. And, you know, I think that Lila, you know, has had a significant impact in different institutions on different generations of people here in the city and, prayerfully, the things that she did that left a very positive impact will continue to grow and live.

PB: Is there anything else that we might've missed or that you wanted to cover?

DT: Uhm...

PB: We can always do part two if you want to. [laughs]

DT: [laughs] I think some update on looking at some of these cities that are still under the vestiges of emergency management need to be investigated more, and people need to be educated more about what the limitations are and what the impact has been of emergency management in these primarily Black cities.

PB: Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

DT: Thank you.