

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

Maureen Taylor

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER

August 25, 2019

Detroit, MI

Narrator

Maureen Taylor was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan. She earned a bachelor's degree in social work from Marygrove College in 1983 and a master's degree in social work from Wayne State in 1994. She is the State Chairperson of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization, a position she has held since 1993.

(Additional Source: Michigan Welfare Rights Organization website)

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

Maureen Taylor discusses her childhood in her tight-knit neighborhood in Detroit and how it influenced her philosophy of social work, how a trip across the country as a teenager made her realize how oppression due to race, gender, and class are tied together, how she came to the welfare rights movement and met Marian Kramer and other activists, her work in welfare rights, the Johnnie Tillmon organizing model, how the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization became involved in the struggle against water shutoffs in Detroit and Highland Park, and why she believes a larger coalition is now developing around water issues. She also discusses the spread of water privatization, emergency management, the water affordability plan, and the brief moratorium that Welfare Rights achieved in the shutoff struggle. She closes by speaking about the legacy of Lila Cabbil and the future she envisions for Detroit.

Keywords

Detroit, Michigan; Emergency management; Highland Park, Michigan; Johnnie Tillmon; Lila Cabbil; Marian Kramer; Michigan Welfare Rights Organization; Privatization; Water affordability; Water shutoffs; Welfare rights

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Transcript of interview conducted August 25, 2019 with:

Maureen Taylor [MT]

Detroit, MI

By: Peter Blackmer [PB]

PB: Please just start by giving us your name, where you live, and your organizations or affiliations.

MT: Yes. My name is Maureen Taylor, and I am serving as the state chairperson of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization. It is headquartered at this point in Detroit, Michigan. So, that's who I am, and that's what I do.

PB: Could you tell us a little bit about the city and your neighborhood growing up?

MT: I'm indigenous to the city of Detroit, so I was born and raised here, and my family with my mom, who was the fifth of nine sisters and brothers, was the first one that was born in the North. So, my mom and my dad are both Detroiters, and we lived in a working-class neighborhood where the people on the left side of me were clergy, the people on the right side of me owned a dry cleaners, the people on the other side of the street from me were factory workers, men and women, and all I knew when I was growing up is that this is the way everybody lived. And if I went to school and I said a bad word, the teacher would call my mom and the...by the time I got home and had to pass by my neighbors, and they would be outside saying, "Maureen, we heard what you said," and I got several spankings along the way and--because we lived in a very tight-knit and close community--and I thought everybody lived that way. I was surprised. Yeah, so.

[0:02:00]

PB: What are some of the major ways that the city has changed since then?

MT: Well, I can remember as a young girl, Miss Johnson lived across the street, and Miss Johnson's husband passed away. And the lady who collected nickels and dimes to play street numbers would come to the side door and knock on it, and she'd say, "Miss Pauline, Miss Johnson's husband died." And I would be standing there, and my mother would go in her smock and get five dollars, ten dollars out and hand it to her. Then, I would go to the front window and I would watch her, the numbers lady. And she would go to every house, side door, and tell everybody that Miss Johnson's husband passed away and what she was doing was collecting money, and she went to every home until I couldn't see how far she went left or how far she went right, and she would take that money and would just walk in Miss Johnson's house. The door would open. She'd walk in, come right back out again, and continue to collect numbers. Five, ten minutes later, the pastor would show up, Reverend Burke, Reverend whoever, and they would show up with five or six women from the church, and they would have platters of chicken and platters of turkey and food, and they'd walk up the steps and open the door and walk in and put those things wherever they put them, and five minutes later they came out.

And what it was was the community love affair. Something had happened, and we didn't want this particular neighbor to lose her house, couldn't pay her rent, couldn't pay insurance, all those kinds of things. And the entire neighborhood, the moment it was announced that this person's husband had died, for three or four or five days, there would be people, and they would just walk in and drop things off and come back out again. That is stuck in my head because it was a...a...a...a replica. It was a description of the kind of community that I thought we all lived in. And as I...I've grown older, I'm always surprised--I shouldn't be anymore--but I've always grown older to be able to determine that if Miss Johnson's husband passed away today, she would be alone, and there would not be a collective effort necessarily to pay her insurance or to bring her some food or to bring her some flowers, and there would not be that community cohesiveness to go there and

take care of her, and that's a big loss. That's a systemic loss that I recognize, and I see it because the work that I do is about helping people and contributing and making people feel safe in their homes. And so often, I feel alone, lonely with welfare rights because what used to be is not anymore.

[0:05:25]

PB: That's a really important story. Thank you for sharing that.

MT: Yeah.

PB: Could you talk a little bit more--you started to, but--just about how that sense of community influences the way that you understand neighborhoods or the work that you do, how you bring that into your organizing work?

MT: Because I...I recognize and I was part of a fabric that included the numbers lady, who was the neighborhood communicator. And we had a phone, but that's not how this happens. Somebody went door-to-door physically to explain to each of the neighbors that one of our neighbors was in pain, and that was so critical. And I watched it, and I'm a little girl and I'm looking at this and I'm watching, and she's going across the street and up and down the block, and the bus would go by, and she'd get on the bus. The bus would stop, and she'd say something. The numbers lady, did she get off the bus? She was the neighborhood communicator. And then when the pastors and the other folks started to go into the community and come around to the house where Miss Johnson was without having to be asked.

So, that influenced me, and I thought, you know, the kind of work that I would like to do--I didn't start off with that--but when I decided that I wanted to pursue a degree in social work, I had an interpretation of what social work was supposed to look like, and it was supposed to look like the numbers lady, Miss Johnson, and the neighborhood rising up to care. And that's...that's the...the description. That's the shape. That's the design that I always had in my head. So, when I finally

decided to go into social work, you...you couldn't shake me from that vision. This is the way social work is supposed to work, and with all of the books and historical women that were early social workers and what not, the way I read what their stories were about, it fit right into what I understood. So there were...there was no question that what I was supposed to do, based off of what that was and that experience of looking and learning, this is what I was supposed to do in my community. So, it fit. It fit right in. Now, I'm not sure if it was supposed to or not [laughs], but for me, this was a description and a design of what social work was supposed to be.

From that, that meant that all of the feelers, all of my connections, all of my communications that meant somebody said to me, "I'm in pain because..." and they would tell me, I already knew what to do 'cause I remembered the number lady. You go to the neighborhood, and you get the resources, and you take them to that person. You don't judge them. The husband might have been drinking--that's not part of the equation. Here's someone who's in trouble and in pain, and you operate with welfare rights up here, and that's the way I understood it. That's how I got into this work, and it's...it...it...it...it has never changed as far as I'm concerned. Mmhmm.

[0:09:01]

PB: So, how did you first get involved in activism or organizing work?

MT: Well, I was a young bride, and my husband at that time lost his job, factory worker, and factory workers were always getting laid off, and...and he had gotten laid off, and I'm trying to understand factory work, how does this work? And at that time, you were off several weeks for change-over, and I had to learn what was change-over, what does that mean? Change-over from this model car to this model car, and it takes time to put the new design and the new equipment in to make the modern-day car. And he was off for a period of time, and I was worried about that. He said, "Not to worry. We're always off like this." Oh, okay, alright, I'm learning. And then, the next year--'cause change-over happens every year. So, the first shutdown was this long [holds hands apart], and then the next shut-down was this long [brings hands closer together], and then the next shutdown was this

long [brings hands even closer together], and then over a period of years, the factories would be closed overnight, and the next morning, you're prepared to go back to work with the new automobile for the next year. So, I thought, "This, this must be important. Something's going on here." And I'm learning it.

Well, I started to pay more attention and started to realize that factory workers were very critical, had carte blanche to go wherever they wanted to go as long as you had an ID badge that said your name and you worked for one of the Big Three, you could go anywhere with that badge. You could go more places with that ID badge than you could with your driver's license. And I thought, "This is interesting!" So I continued to try to learn, to try to hear, and try to connect the dots to understand what was happening. When I ran into people who said, "I don't have anything to eat. I did not work at a factory, I work someplace else, and I'm hungry, and I've got these kids." Right away, I started putting the story together. If you were a factory worker and you didn't have a job, you had some income, so you could still manage. If you worked for Blue Cross Blue Shield and you got laid off or fired, after a couple of months, you were out. And so I started, "Okay, there's something about factory work that's different from anybody else." And I started to learn that lesson, started to put the dots and whatnot together.

So as more and more people started to be laid off that were not factory workers, there was a need for me to find somebody that knew more about this question of rising poverty, about not having food, I can't pay my rent. Somebody needed to tell me something 'cause I wasn't able to understand what was the difference here. And it was quite by accident that I had met a young woman earlier, and her name was Marian Kramer, and I contacted her, however I did. And she had me to meet her at a welfare office. And immediately once I got there, I didn't know what was going to happen, but Marian picked up a manual and threw it and hit a worker behind the desk, and I was horrified. And I thought, "She's crazy." And she's as tall as I am, and workers started running, and people were hysterical, and the superintendent, or whoever she was, the district manager came out and said, "Alright, Miss Kramer. There's no need to destroy the office. What do you want?" And Marian said something to this woman. And in minutes, I had food stamps if I needed them, I had health care coverage if I needed it, and I had all these things. And I thought, "Wait a minute. She's not any bigger than me, so they're not scared of her. What is it that she knows that she has that makes all of this happen?"

So once we left the office, and I was clear about what had just happened, I insisted. I said, "Listen, I don't know your history, but I want to know what you know. Is something going on here? And these people are not afraid of you. I want to know what it is that you have a handle on that make them respond in this kind of way." And that's how I met Marian Kramer. And she was, at that time, chair of Wayne County...I can't remember. She was with welfare rights already a number of years. And that's how I stumbled into her. You know, from...we had meetings and whatnot, and I went to some of the other meetings, and I met May Payne, who was a religious leader in the... [laughs] in the city, who always took the position of throwing devils out, bad people, and she cast out devils all the time, 'cause she's crazy too. And...and all of these characters and all these different people I met...Thelma Eckles ended up being one of my best buddies. Thelma was on dialysis even then, three days a week for dialysis, and Thelma was on picket lines. So I thought, "I'm in the right group. They're all crazy, so maybe I'm crazy too. We're all just working together!" That's how I stumbled into welfare rights.

[0:14:53]

PB: What was it that Marian Kramer had a grasp on that you were describing? What was it that made her such a force in that office that, you know, whether you found that out in that moment or later on that, you know, made her such an effective force?

MT: It took me a while. Marian brought to my consciousness this question of poverty. It was a bigger picture 'cause I couldn't understand it growing up in a neighborhood, a working-class neighborhood. We weren't poor, and I didn't understand the concept of poverty the way she was talking about it. I never questioned it 'cause I knew she knew something. So I listened and I listened and I listened and I listened to some of these other people, and it finally boiled down to a question of class, and that there are folks that are in this class, and Maureen, you and your family are part of this class, and what that is is we are always subject to being laid off. We are always subject to having our employment severed. All of these kinds of things happen, and there is no chance for you to figure out how to get into this other class, this corporate class. But, that's what the fight is.

And as I understood that and listened...Oh, wait a minute, you know, I'm a person of color and there's this question of race and it's always there. And we used to have long, long talks about this, and it became clear to me after many, many, many conversations that the lens of color is always used in this country because it works so well to divide folks, and that color will always be a...a facet of the United States of America, but it only works if you're able to convince people that color is the only thing. But if you say color and class, now that enlarges the army that's fighting against oppression. It took a long time to learn that lesson, long time because I...I couldn't see it on my own. I could see the discrimination based on color. It was prevalent. I could see that. But this poverty thing didn't show up. In the history books, what it said is that people came to America so they could escape poverty and here everybody's equal. And I read that, everybody's equal. And I thought, "Wait a minute. I know some folks that may not be quite as equal as me." And...and it became clear, but you have to study this and learn this and read this, and she [Marian Kramer] was just so instrumental in opening that door so that I could get a political interpretation of the way the world works.

[0:17:41]

PB: Now, where did gender identities fit within that analysis that you were developing?

MT: When you're b--I been a girl a long time, and when you show up as a girl, there are certain things that you learn along the way that come with quote unquote [makes air quotes] "baggage" of being female. And I knew some of those things and, you know, my mom and dad talked to me about some other things, but I can remember the first time--my father was from Arkansas, Little Rock, Arkansas. And they're, mom and dad, both gone now. But I remember when my father told me, he said, "I don't want you to ever go South." And, "Well, why, Daddy?" He said, "Just listen to me. I don't want you to go to these southern states." And he had that look on his face, so I, "Oh, okay." So, I didn't question it. I'm gonna put this in my mind, and later on I'll connect the dots 'cause he just told me something and I trust him and let's see what he's talking about.

Then, there came another date later on where dad said, "We're gonna go across the country 'cause I want you all to see the world." And he drove. My mother was one of the last of the kept women. My mother did not drive, and my father always took the perspective, "She's my bride. I'm gonna give her whatever she wants, whenever she wants it." So I thought, "Gee, I'm a girl, too. One day, I'm gonna, you know, this is gonna work for me too." And we drive across the country, and I saw little girls and little boys picking tomatoes, little ones. And we go to another, you know, we were, we're driving, we're gone two months. And all throughout the North, I saw the roads--women were on the roads selling vegetables, whatever it is they were doing. And then all across the country, even when we went to Mexico and went to the bull fight, and I saw the way women were treated differently from men. Not in my house. In my neighborhood in Detroit, it may...it may have never come to my consciousness that there was something happening. But by leaving my comfort zone and traveling with my mom and my father and my sisters, I could see girls are treated different than boys. So, I had that in my head, I'm not sure where it fits into everything yet, but I had that understanding.

And by the time we came back--and it was the trip that really just turned my life around 'cause I saw so many things. I knew that people were hungry--and I was 14, 15 year--13 or 14. And I knew people were hungry, but not in my neighborhood. I never saw that. And so later on, as I became older and started to pay attention, I already knew that there's no reason for anybody to be hungry 'cause I saw grain. I saw barley, and I saw whatever else, went to California and acres and acres of stuff growing. So I already knew, you know, what is this about. Then, I have all of these remnants, pieces of information, and they slowly start to fit. And this gender question was key because Dad took me some place and I saw how girls were treated. Once I came out of my immediate neighborhood, I had that information, and I start to look for it, look and see if people are treating me differently because I'm a person of color, are they treating me differently because I'm a girl, are they treating me differently because I live in a working-class community. And as I began to get more mature, I could see the difference. I never saw it in the neighborhood where I grew up, never saw it there, but once I left that and I went to different places, then I could see it. It was three things: being oppressed because I'm a girl, being oppressed because I'm a female, and being oppressed because I belong to the working class. It came together in a fist. I got it. It took me a while, but I got it. Mmhmm.

[0:22:33]

PB: So you start to interlock those different digits into the fist...

MT: It, it was a fist.

PB: ...and...and how does that, if we're going with that kind of analogy, how, what does that fist look like in terms of the work that Michigan Welfare Rights Organization does? How do you bring that kind of analysis into the day-to-day work and the mission of the organization?

MT: One of the tenets of welfare rights is when you come into the office and you're in trouble 'cause your lights are off or about to be off, your gas is off or about to be off, the water's off or about to be off, you're about to be evicted, have been evicted, whatever it is, and you come into welfare rights, it's generally the worst day of your life. You've tried everything else, nothing else works. Nobody's able to help you. And you would show up here, and people would start telling their story, and some would start crying. I stopped the interview right away, and I told them, "We got a rule at welfare rights. There's no crying at welfare rights. There's no crying. Go in the bathroom, wash your face, get those tears in order, because you're now coming to an organization of soldiers, and we don't cry here." And I'm real strict about this, and I--the worst of them, go to the bathroom, get yourself together, and come back in, no tears. I'd get the details, I'd get the information, and that's the way we run welfare rights. We don't have time for regrets and tears. It's just, no, not enough time.

If you are here because there is a horrible, horrific circumstance that's going on in your household with your family, tears don't do anything but make you feel bad inside. And once you come to welfare rights, our job is to make you feel good inside. You have not done anything to deserve to be mistreated the way you're being mistreated. So, let's change the paradigm. There's nothing that you have done to make somebody say it's okay to make you starve. Nothing. There's nothing that you have done to make somebody say your water needs to be turned off because you can't pay for it. What? Where is that written? There's nothing you

have done to say that because you couldn't pay your car loan, somebody had the right to come and take your car away and repossess it. I throw the Bible on the table, I put the dictionary on the table and slam it down. Show me where it says that. If you don't see it, then I take this fist and I beat on the table. We're gonna change. Whatever you were yesterday or this morning, you're different now, and now you're part of an army that fights because you have rights 'cause you're part of...of the spirit like everybody else. That's what we bring to welfare rights. There's no crying here, only fighting.

Now, I'll tell my last story. Most folks are gonna die one day, maybe not me, but most folks are gonna die one day. And at that time, if you have any kind of spiritual beliefs, somebody along the way might ask you, well, what did you do with your life? I'm not gonna get that question 'cause I've done everything I needed to do, and the moment that the spirit comes to get me, I expect a beautiful apartment with air conditioning, Motown music, lobster--I love lobster--and all the cranberry juice I can drink. So, that's what I live my life for. That's how we roll at welfare rights. There's no crying here. There's only fighting and organizing.

[0:26:00]

PB: Can you tell me about Johnnie Tillmon and how Johnnie Tillmon's organizing model fits into this kind of approach that you bring?

MT: Okay. Now, I never met Johnnie Tillmon. She was already passed on by the time I came into welfare rights, but Marian [Kramer] and Freddy Nixon and May Payne and Thelma Eckles and Faith Evans and some of these folks that were predecessors of mine, Dottie [Dorothy] Stevens, Mary B-J [Bricker-Jenkins], they knew her. And Marian particularly, boy. When I came into welfare rights, these were tough taskmasters. Boy, these women here scared you to death. And they explained to me that Johnnie Tillmon's methodology was about getting the victims of poverty trained and clear about the politics, about the politics and the foundations of poverty, and that Johnnie Tillmon believed that if you show and explain to low-income people, that class of folks, what the real totality is of the...of a crisis situation, they are able to explain and to advocate on their own

behalf. And that's different from the Saul Alinsky group and whatnot that says, you know, let's get the intellectuals together and they will be the best spokespersons for what's going on in this class. And that's nothin--that's not bad, but it's just different. So Johnnie Tillmon brought that concept of that the victims of poverty are the best advocates and supporters and spokespersons for their own conditions, and that's the way I was trained and I was trained very good in that, so.

We spent a lot of time acclimating low-income people to the rules and regulations. Generally, what we would do is that we would find that individual over three, four, five, six months who may have just joined welfare rights that never graduated from high school and the one who thought that man or that woman was the dumbest. And that's the one we would make in charge of our political education, that one, 'cause that's the one that will dig deeper, understand what those words and those con--and those concepts mean and able to transcribe that information to everybody else. So that's the way I was trained and that's the way I understood it, and that come right off of the head and the heart of Miss Johnnie Tillmon.

[0:28:43]

PB: You've named so many impactful women organizers who have come from Michigan Welfare Rights. What do people need to know about these women? Because we're--most folks aren't going to hear these names. They're not in history books, ...

MT: I know.

PB: ...and it sounds like based on how you've mentioned their names that they need to be. So what do folks need to know?

MT: Ooooh boy. Some of the women that I've named--Faith Evans is a man--and all the rest of the people that I have mentioned their names--and there are

others--these are the foundation of the right to exist as a low-income person. These are the folks that built the basement. These are the folks that built the walls. These are the...the Bob Vilas of welfare rights. They put the foundations together, the strength together, turned on the air conditioning at the very bottom and built on top of that structure of strength. And no, these women and these men, they are not listed in different places and we're losing them, you know, because some of the women that started welfare rights back in the 1960s, they're gone.

And they--oh my goodness--what they brought was, you know, a, a gender identity that had such pride, that these women could walk with you to Washington, D.C. in a demonstration and would tell the police chief, "It's 500 of us, and we're gonna march from this church to the capitol building." And the police chief--and I'm...I'm looking, trying to learn--the police chief would say, "Well, do you have a permit?" And they'd say, "Yeah." And they'd go fill out a piece of paper and say "Permit" and they'd hold it up and give it to the chief of police [laughs], and I thought, "Oh man, this is great." And we would march where we were supposed to march and get on the steps of where we needed to get on, and they were fearless. And I thought, "Gee, we going to jail." And I would say that, and they'd say, "Well, going to jail's not bad. They have food in there, and they have a place for you to rest and, and all of us will be there with you." Okay! So it...it sounded right to me.

But they brought a, such a...a...a source of...of entrenched love for poor people. No judgments, you know, they'd...people have the right to exist, they have the right to eat, they have the right to grow old in their beds when they're 130 years of age. They just die out, and folks should not be dying because they don't have health care, or they can't get enough food to eat, and all those kinds of things. And it's these women--these women! I'm telling you, these women were fearless. Some of them were married three and four different times. I didn't understand that at first, but after a while I got it. It scared husbands off all the time, and...and...and I understood [laughs], understood clearly what was going on 'cause these women here... We would get up in the middle of the night, four o'clock, three o'clock in the morning, get ourselves together, meet wherever it was we were supposed to meet, get on a bus, go someplace for 10, 12 hours, get in a car, drive 10 or 12 hours, and pick up Michelle and Rick [Tingling-Clemmons??] along the way and all these kinds of things.

And...and the lesson was that gender did not have to be an impediment. If you're born a girl, that dunnit make you any different than Robin Hood or Sojourner Truth or anybody else. If you had the courage and the commitment and the clarity to fight against oppression just because a person is poor, didn't matter what you look like on the outside, nobody cares. Here is the fight, and it doesn't matter. If you're diabetic, so what? Here's the fight. If you have one kidney left, so what? Here's the fight. You have cancer? Sorry to hear it. Here's the fight. You...you...you...you've had an amputation. You can walk slower, but you gonna walk. There are no barriers to the fight for what's right. And these women, they didn't have to say that much, but these women showed me and they showed everybody else that this question of courage and commitment didn't have anything to do with what you look like on the outside. This was about head and heart and no fear.

[0:33:27]

PB: Now these same women that you're talking about have also been victims of just terrible racist narratives and policy attacks at city, state, federal levels.

MT: Absolutely.

PB: Can you talk about the ways that you and Michigan Welfare Rights fights back against those kind of narrative and policy attacks?

MT: Yeah that is...this question of these policy issues is a...a very intricate question, even today. We get people that come to welfare rights and they say, "I need this kind of help, and I went to my worker at the welfare office and I couldn't get it, and they give all that kind of help to people from the Middle East and they give all this kind of help to people from..." and they start naming different places. And I...I had to become absolutely proficient in understanding welfare policy and law. There came a time that--when I was still able to conduct hearings on a regular basis--I didn't lose a hearing for 10, 12 years. I was more than just a pretty face,

and I knew it. I went there, and I studied those policies and could quote them chapter and verse. You could not spank me on a policy issue 'cause I would always whoop your ass. Always. There was no question about that. This issue came up about race, and only Black people were poor, and I knew that wasn't true. I had been across the country with my dad and I...I knew that wasn't true. So, I'd seen little Native American kids, and I'd seen little Hispanic and Latino kids. And when we went to Canada and went to Quebec, I saw poor little white kids. So anybody that tried to tell me that, oh, you know, only Black people are the poorest people in the world, I--that's, that's not true. I know better. I've been on reservations, don't tell me that. I was born at night, but not last night. Can't tell me that nonsense. So, I knew I had more than a kernel of information.

So today, when people come in and they say, "I want to get what everybody else gets, these immigrants and...and these refugees," I stop that conversation so fast that I usually scare people, and I like to do it, and I won't let your trifling behind out until you hear what I have to say. Whoever's coming to welfare rights, whatever they look like on the outside, is not your business to try to describe somebody else's case as if they're in better shape or worse shape than you. It's not based on race. This is a situation where the attempt is always to divide. I don't want to work with this one, I don't want to work with that one. Here's an Arab, and this other word that's used, and I hate it. I won't say it 'cause it's the N-word to me, A-rab. I stop it. Can't talk to me like that! You cannot say those things in front of me. Just like when I go to the grocery store, and somebody's there trying to pay for food or something with food stamps, a food stamp card. And people in the line, "[exhales loudly] I wish they'd hurry up." I take my earrings off, I take my watch off, put them on the counter, and get right in your face, "What the hell did you mean by that?" Can't say those things around me because I understand the difference.

So here at welfare rights, this question of race...you can't bring racism in here. We understand that racism exists, and there may be places that you go that you're mistreated because of the color of your skin. But our task, certainly my task, is to tell you and show you, you have to rise above that. We've got a lady in her seventies who's running for council down in Michigan City [Indiana], right now. [I can't find anyone in Michigan City, Indiana that matches this story. However, it appears to be the same as a quote from Jean Cramer who was running for city council in Marysville, Michigan] And she's running for a council job and she's, you

know, just cavalierly, “I think we have too many foreign people in Michigan City,”--two, three days ago--“and we don’t need any more of them. We need to keep Michigan City as [air quotes] ‘white’ as we can keep it.” Well, I’m looking for her fax number or an e-mail address ‘cause I’m gonna give her an American lesson. I will give her an American lesson and start off by explaining she doesn’t look at all Native American. She doesn’t look at all like she’s a Native American.

So, our job at welfare rights is to put this question of race in perspective. The prism of racism is always available--again, because it’s been such a wonderful dividing tool. So we have to go there, and racism does exist on the basis of color. But, this [air quotes] “ism” that exists on the basis of you being poor, that one is the issue of...of wel...of welfare rights scholars to get to. So, we face it, and we face it up front. There are white, more white people that are poor in America than any other...any...any other nationality. So, we don’t listen to that, you know. “Give me what somebody else got ‘cause they got more than me.” Stop lying, you don’t know what the hell you talking about, and lock the door so I can give you a quick education, so once you leave here, you...you can be smarter and don’t have to be as dumb as you are at this moment. So.

[0:38:53]

PB: Thank you.

MT: Mmhmm. [laughs]

PB: I want to pivot a little bit into how Michigan Welfare Rights first started getting involved in, again, around water shutoffs.

MT: Again, it was that devilish Marian Kramer. Here we are in Highland Park [Michigan], and the mayor of Highland Park--he just passed away a few weeks ago. His name was Linsey Porter--and Marian and Gen[eral Baker], her late husband, very close friends with Linsey Porter, and he, Linsey, contacted Marian and said something about water shutoffs in Highland Park, and Marian, she’s telling me

about it. He wants us to go to his office. We go to his office, and he gives us a list, and it's stapled, and it's three or four or five pages with addresses on it. We say, "Linsey, what's this?" He said, "Well, these are the names of people--not the names, but the addresses of folks who have either had water shut off or about to be shut off." And I looked. It might have been 6[00], 700 names and I said, "That can't be right." So Marian said, "Well, let's go over there."

So, we get in the car and we started driving up and down streets. So, it might be 10 Glendale. Next to that is 12 Glendale. Next to that is 14 Glendale, then 16 Glendale, and everybody knows us, so we're knocking on the door. "And is it true that you all are having water shutoffs in this property?" "Yeah, yeah. Don't tell anybody. We don't have water. We haven't had water in two or three weeks." And we're going in and out and up and down the different blocks. And so Marian jumped right on it, "We have to do something." We started organizing in Highland Park, getting people to come out. We had to talk to the Water Department in Highland Park and get with the mayor and everybody else.

So, it started there. Then by the time, February or March of 2014, the Water Department started to threaten folks in Detroit. Now, we'd already had arguments about water being shut off, but when people started calling us down at Welfare Rights talking about, "The Water Department is on my porch, Miss [Maureen] Taylor, can you do anything about it?" And we were getting so many calls. That was, again, February or March of 2014. I called down to the city and looked at--looked up some of our friends and met a couple of our buddies over at a restaurant, and they showed me a list. And there was a list--I'll never forget the number--59,990 addresses on a list to be shut off. And I...I...I thought it was a typo. I said, "Oh, this is wrong." He said, "No. And this is just the first list." And you know how you sit and you list--"What?!"

That's where this thing started to blow up, and this was directly connected to factory workers being put out of work, don't need all these people anymore, no point in having these wonderful educational opportunities 'cause they are never going to be able to hold a full-time job again, so why should they be educated? Or why should they have water? Why should they have housing? It was a nightmare. And that's the biggest blow, and, of course, that led to Welfare Rights contacting United Nations and they came, contacting international organizations, and I

started to write the pope [Francis], new guy, and, “You gotta do something. You gotta do something. You gotta do something.” And, got that call six, seven months into this fight where a guy who said he was calling from Rome, and the pope wanted to see me. [mimes holding phone to ear] “Who is this really?” And turned out it was the pope. Here’s the message there: never write the pope a letter ‘cause he reads that stuff.

And that’s how all of this started, but it was Marian’s just absolute brilliant recognition that water is about to be privatized because they need--this corporate class needs some kind of way of imagining and continue to imagine profits at any expense, and that’s that only thing left. Either they bottle air--hard to do that--or they bottle dirt--really hard to do that--or they bottle that water. That’s how that happened, Marian Kramer.

[0:43:44]

PB: And I know that was the...the fear in Highland Park in the...

MT: Yes.

PB: ...early 2000s, right? Can you talk a little bit about kind of like an overview of that struggle ‘cause I know that that was before the city council in Highland Park.

MT: Yeah. The piece around the water in Highland Park really got started when it was decided that Highland Park lost its Chrysler factory and they moved. The tax base was now in trouble, and the kind of dollars that Highland Park was able to present was no longer there. So now, you have to have a whole new interpretation of city government, and that’s what started to happen in Highland Park. And then, it became clear, the people in Highland Park, [makes air quotes] according to the corporate class and the government, they are just too dumb to figure their way out of this economic and financial nightmare that they’re in. So, we’re going to give them something called an emergency manager. And an emergency manager is the one that is appointed by the governor who earns two and three times as

much money as the mayor in a poor city, and they void all elections. You know, they just take over. So this is, you know, a dictatorship that's now called an emergency manager, emergency financial manager.

And this person comes in and, you know, contracts with workers are gone, tell the police department you can't get your pensions anymore. They just destroyed rules. So here we get to the water, and in Highland Park, the water department in Highland Park was owned by the people in Highland Park. They had access to water different than what we had in Detroit. Well, all of it started to merge now because the people in Highland Park, the numbers started to go down. There's no more tax base, so here's that water. And here comes these corporate folks who are now enticing government officials in Highland Park. "You don't have a choice. We want you to start privatizing this water. We gonna let Nestle come in who de--who makes chocolate candy bars, and we're gonna let this company in and that company come in."

And...and...and Highland Park, Marian [Kramer], Welfare Rights, we mount a struggle. We are not going to let you come here and do that. Okay, we're just not going to let you do it, and we were engaged in this movie called The Waterfront. That's what that was based on, you know, folks coming into the City Council in Highland Park talking about, "We're going to manage your water. And you have to pay us, this corporate company, this amount of money, and if you have any problems, you pay for that. We don't pay for your problems, you just pay us to manage." What is that? So nope, not gonna have it, all of Highland Park is involved, all of Detroit is involved, all of Hamtramck [Michigan] is involved 'cause now we have the political acuity. If we don't stop this beast in Highland Park, Detroit's right next door, and right next door to Detroit is Hamtramck, and right next door to this is Sterling Heights [Michigan], and right--we have to stop it back here.

So, we were engaged in that fight. The population in Highland Park is still going down even today. In Detroit, we topped out at about two million and that number started to go down as these plants started to shut, and now we're about 800,000. More than a million people left just Detroit. Tax base is in trouble. Here comes a guy who says, "I'm gonna help you, and you need to declare bankruptcy." Citizens have to declare bankruptcy, what are you talking about? So, he brought a Black

guy in with great big ears and dark-skinned fella and...and...and...and, you know, it's easier to colonize people if you bring somebody that looks like you look. They didn't even take the bankruptcy concept to Highland Park because it crashed so fast. They brought it here, but we were both looking and paying attention. And that's what happened. These were economic moves by these corporate pirates who wanted Highland Park water, they wanted Detroit water. Somebody in the middle of the night was able to get the folks in Highland Park to go to sleep, and Detroit took over Highland Park's water. It was supposed to be temporary. That never happens, that's like being a little pregnant. It...it never goes back.

And so today, in the city of Detroit, we have owned our own water and all the processes connected with water from the very beginning. We don't own it now. Now, it's the Great Lakes Water Authority and God-knows-whoever-else is involved, and the rates of water continue to go up. The rates of water in Highland Park continue to go up, and we have no control or ownership anymore. It happened [snaps fingers] just like that, at night, when you're sleeping in your bed. And you wake up in the morning and, "What happened?" And somebody else took it. It's a robbery without a gun. I don't live in a bankrupt city; I live in a city that's been bankrupted. Kevyn Orr was paid a thousand dollars an hour in Detroit, where we're poor, and he was living in a hotel downtown and had to get security because we were looking for that son of a gun. But they paid him in two months more than a welfare mother and three kids got in a year. Welcome to America. That's what happened. Mmm.

[0:50:01]

PB: Was the emergency management in Highland Park...did that provide a blueprint for Detroit?

MT: Well, I don't know if it provided a blueprint because the...the emergency mana--manager in Highland Park--I've forgotten her last name, her first name was Ramona [Henderson-Pearson] something. And...and she...she was the perfect face for this. African American woman, dreadlocks, you know, the whole African look like she's one of us. A...all that. And she showed up, and she brought some other hedge [head?] hunters with her. And what we learned from her is that a level of

arrogance--'cause her conversation was, "You can't find anybody else able to come into Highland Park and work on the financial disaster that you residents have created for the little bit of money that they're paying me." They're paying her more than a million dollars, and her complaint was nobody would do this job and you all need to be thankful. So by the time Kevyn Orr came--and you still have that, that contingent of people that says, you know, "Clarence Thomas, he's a brother." He's not my brother. Ain't nobody's brother that I know of, but that concept that's still...that race. Let's give him a chance.

So when they brought that no-good, back-stabbing, trifling son of a gun Kevyn Orr in here, Black guy, and...and he's talking about how stupid people are in Detroit, and all these factory workers that just have high-school education and...and just don't know how to manage in the world and look at how backwards and dumb. And within weeks of that argument at a press conference--come here and said this stuff--he was demanding time-and-a-half. [laughs] Something that workers in Detroit organized, time-and-a-half on weekends and double-time on Sundays. And he wanted worker rights after he talked about us like a dog. So, he needed security. He needed security to go to the bathroom.

But, Ramona, and then Kevyn Orr, and then, my guess is...and you know, there's up in Flint, when they brought the emergency manager? And the majority of the people are African American, so they found an African American to go there and do that. And in Pontiac, a majority of the people are African American, so they needed an African American to go do that. And they have emergency managers, I'm told, in certain places in the Southwest of this country, and they go find Latinos to be the African face for an emergency manager. So, you know, this is...this is insidious, but it works because they're able to convince people that you should give this person a chance. So, here's Ramona, here's Kevyn, and it keeps working, and it keeps working, keeps working.

[0:53:14]

PB: So, during the Highland Park struggles when Michigan Welfare Rights...

MT: Yeah.

PB: ...and Legal Services put together the water affordability plan...

MT: Yes!

PB: Could you tell us about the origins of the water affordability plan, what became of that struggle with the Detroit City Council and, you know, I guess a crash course on that history?

MT: We had a very interesting man in 2003, 2004, 2005, who was the head of the Detroit Water and Sewage Department, and his name--he's one of my favorite people--his name was Victor Mercardo [sic. Mercado]. Now today, Mr. Mercardo [sic. Mercado] is known as Inmate Number 602903. That's the inmate number. But at that time, he was the head of the Water Department and the city had started to, you know, announce plans to shut off water, [20]04, [20]05. And we're alarmed. We go down to City Council. We argue with 'em, "You know, you can't do that. You can't do that." And these arguments that go on back and forth, and Victor Mercardo [sic. Mercado] would be invited to the Detroit City Council, just [air quotes] "classic (?)." And he would come and he would say, "No, I don't think we can manage the water affordability plan." And he would come up, the Headlee amendment, and some other legal, civil law. "We can't do it."

And we'd come back the next day, and we'd insist we're gonna have this hearing. And here's Victor Mercardo [Mercado] and, "No, we can't do it." Whole new set of reasons, and third or fourth time, more sets of reasons. And then, that was one of the big mistakes that I made. He showed up after four, five, or six times, and he's holding his head, and the words come out. You know, people are getting their water turned off and threats and we just can't have it, and...and we want to know how many people's water is off at this particular moment. And he would turn and look and turn and look. "I don't have that information, but I will get it for you." And then, somebody else would say on council, "Well, how long is water...what's the average length of time that water would be turned off?" And his whole staff would be sitting in...in the front row. "What's the average length of time that

water might be shut off?” And he’d look at the staff, and he’d look over here, and, of course, they’ve got calculators out and pens and papers. They never knew anything. Folks who worked at the water department never could give an answer.

Then came the big enchilada. “I have decided,” --Victor Mercado [Mercado] talking--“I think we can do a water affordability plan, and I want to join in with these women and these men and welfare rights, and I want to help craft this.” And I thought, “Victory! Victory! He’s finally got it!” “And I want to have meetings with you all, and I want to make certain that the interest on late fees we’ve collected every year, and we want to put the first five million dollars into the fund so that we can develop water affordability plan.” Alright, now all that’s going on, and Welfare Rights, Michigan Legal Services, United Housing Coalition, the Poverty Law group, all of us are meeting over at the Hannan House [Cafe] to say, “What can we do? What kind of language? How do we want this to work?” And we put together a rough draft, five, six, seven, eight pages, whatever we could, that talked about water being charged on the basis of ability to pay. That’s where we came from.

Then, one of our attorney buddies, Marilyn Mullane, said, “I know this guy, and this guy’s name is Roger Colton, and he lives in Boston, and he’s an expert on water or utility activities that are based on income.” “Well, can you call him?” “Yeah, I’ll call him.” She called him, and we put some money together, mostly Michigan Legal Services, and brought Roger Colton to Detroit, kept him in the room eight, nine hours, however long. We loved him from the very minute he stepped in, and he loved us too. And we talked to him, explained where we wanted to go. He said, “I’d be happy to work with you.” He took the documents that we put together, and took them, and then two days, two weeks, however long it was, he sent something back, put the legalese language on it. It’s about 20, 21 pages. We read it word-for-word, all of welfare rights, and it was perfect.

So, that was 2004. In 2005, we submitted it to the Detroit City Council. They wanted some revisions. Not a problem, nothing graphic was asked, and they agreed. You know, 2005, they said yes. Here comes 2006, we’re still trying to get the details, Victor Mercado [Mercado] still in the mix. 2007, they want a few more things done. Still in the mix, we made a few more alterations. The Detroit City Council approved it. The mayor at that time was Kwame Kilpatrick. Everybody

agreed. Everything was fine. I'm still thinking Victor Mercado [Mercado], the enemy, but he's on our side. And then I realized: you can't be friends with a snake.

And I missed that lesson because he started to do--the water department started to do is to create a series of articles and narratives. The people in Detroit cannot and will not and don't want to pay their water bills, so everybody's else's bill is gonna go up just a little bit 'cause they won't pay theirs. Now, what we want you to do on this little piece of paper that comes in your bill, it's an opt-in or opt-out opportunity. And if you agree that you want to pay people's bills who won't pay theirs, just put a check by where it says fifty cents and what we'll charge you is an additional fifty cents a month so you can pay for those slackers. Well, how you think that went? You know, that didn't go well. People said, "We're not paying for them," you know. And that's the way it was put. So, he did that knowing that, knowing what the outcome would be. And that's how the water affordability plan ended up on the table and it just stayed there. It never went any further. Even today. Mmhmm. Lessons learned. Yeah. If it...if it hisses and it squirms on its belly and it's got a rattler in the tail, then you have to assume it might be a rattlesnake. But I didn't see on the belly, and I didn't hear the rattle, but I understood it after we got tricked like that. I'll never do that again. Yeah.

[1:00:18]

PB: What does the future look like for the water affordability plan today?

MT: We have not stopped fighting for water and water affordability. I think that the truth is is that circumstances outside of our control is making the ground more fertile for a better victory, a larger victory. We've had lots of little, small victories along the way. But we're in line for a larger victory now because so many cities across the country are coming up with lead water problems. So many people across the country are coming up with Viola [Veolia?] and some of these international corporations coming in to say, "Your population has gone down. Your economics are different. You can't pay for water. Why don't you let us do it?" So privatization activities are spreading, and now people are calling Welfare Rights, "What happened with you guys? How can I get a copy of the water affordability plan?" And now, we've got lawyers that are contacting us. We have doctors. We

put together a report, We The People Group, about what happens if water's turned off in one house in the neighborhood and how everybody gets sick.

So we've got a different kind of a mix that is coming together now, and I think that reminds me of what happens in a volcano. The lava just goes and it goes and it goes, and here we're out front of the lava, but the lava's coming quickly. And because the infrastructures across the nation is so bad and things are falling apart, now that mentality that, "Well, I'm in Bakersfield, California. That's not happening to me. And I'm in so-and-so, Montana. That's not happening to me." It's happening to you now, and now people want to get information. So, I think that the future of water affordability, we still have a ways to go. We've got a good attorney group in Philadelphia [Pennsylvania] that's operating the water affordability plan that we sent there, and it's working just better than well. We've got something going on in Cleveland [Ohio], and water bills are being charged based on people's capacity to pay, something going on in Baltimore [Maryland]. Chicago [Illinois], the new mayor there is taking a look at this and have already started to have some level of implementation about water being charged on the basis of income. Chilly [??] is out in Colorado, and little places around that--but we're still ahead of the curve. But the curve is coming. The curve is coming.

All these environmentalists that never had any kind of concern about water shutoffs, they wanted to save the whales. I got that, I like whales too. But, you, you know, what about save Mary and, you know, Joann over here? They weren't interested in that. Now that all of Brazil is burning up and people are saying, "Gee, looks like we better do something about that," and then the headlines in the papers are about infrastructure problems, now the environmentalists are our friends. And they call and they say, "Maureen, would you come over and speak?" "Sure." "Marian, would you come over and speak?" "Sure." And now, all the stars are coming together. We got a little bit more push to do, but I see a good future, 'cause there's no other choice. We're out front, but we're trying to wait for them to catch up.

[1:04:06]

PB: Now, with all these other cities that you mentioned that this is either there or it's coming...

MT: Yeah.

PB: ...to them, what advice--I came from Newark [New Jersey] before I moved to Detroit. I was just there a couple weeks ago.

MT: [laughs] Yep.

PB: This is what people are talking about, but they don't have the tools necessary,
...

MT: Mmhmm.

PB: ...and that's clear in conversation.

MT: Sure.

PB: What advice do you give to folks in other cities where this is coming?

MT: I...I have travelled all across this nation and telling people, be warned that this water crisis is coming to you. In 2010, we had the Social Forum in Detroit, 30,000 some-odd people showed up here, and I had already been to Pacific Northwest, to the Northeast. I been all over the country--except down South--been to all those places, and I told people, "You...you...you have to be aware." And I get a...a million telephone calls and e-mail messages now where people are saying, "You were here in 2005. You were here in 2006. You came to visit me in 2009, and we listened, but we didn't listen hard enough. Tell us what we need to do now." And so, my message--and that's Welfare Rights' message

across the country--this nightmare does not have a choice but to come to you. The nature of this beast is like Jaws. Jaws knows only how to eat, and he'll start at your ankles and come up to your kneecaps and your hips are in the future. And we tell folks, Jaws is loosed, is loosed, okay? Not just loose, loosed. And Jaws has a lot of family members and they're all over the place trying to position themselves to eat up your access to public water. Be warned, and after you're warned, then you have to organize yourself to fight against 'em.

Here's Michigan [holds up hand]--this way [reverses hand direction to look like Michigan]--here's Mecosta County [points to Mecosta County on hand], and already Nestle went there. We told the Quaker group, the Amish group, we went up there. Don't believe them. They're gonna give you a library. Yeah, they're gonna give you a library. They're gonna pave the roads. They gonna build a road, they're gonna pave 'em too, they're gonna bring you a softie ice cream store. They're gonna do all of that. But in the end, they're gonna sink their wells where you feed your crops and your cattle. "Well, we take people at what they say." Okay. Okay, you're gonna do that. So, Nestle went there, dried up all the wells, 200 dollar permit per year to drill as much water and put my water in a bottle and sell it. My water! And they're selling it all over the place with beautiful pictures about how good the water is--it is good, it's my water! And it belongs to Nestle for 200 dollars. We told folks. Now, some of my Amish friends and whatnot, "Maureen, would you be willing to come up here?" No, I'm not coming up there. I told you what was gonna happen. Of course, I'll come. But, you have to warn folks, and that's all we can do. That's all we can do. This is a money-making, jaw-eating, flesh-eating monster, and it does not know anything other than eat and eat and eat.

[1:07:32]

PB: So along those lines of, I guess, the lessons that you learned from the struggle, what lessons did you learn from the Highland Park struggle that inform the way that you organized in...in resistance to the water shutoffs in Detroit?

MT: The great lesson out of Highland Park was that they were one of the first to get engaged in something called an emergency manager. I swore nothing like that

could exist. You can't tell people that their elections are void. You can't destroy election results that put in your own people. I swore that that couldn't happen. When it did happen, I would run to my front porch and listen and wait for the masses to show up 'cause I know they gonna stop this. It didn't happen. Nobody came. By the time the emergency managers came to Detroit, I ran to the porch again to wait for the masses to come. We brought Rachel Maddow here and she did one of the finest, most comprehensive, inclusive reports I have ever seen. She talked about this water situation for five nights straight and discussed it and demonstrated and showed what it was about, and at the end of all of these days, she said, "I don't understand why the country is not alarmed by what's happening in one of our major cities."

The lesson was that if you put a frog in a pot and a lily pad and cool water, the frog will enjoy the frog living standards every day, give him a fly to eat every day, frog having a wonderful time. And you turn a little heat up, water still not too bad. Frog will stay there, keep feeding him flies, lily pad's still there. Keep turning the water up, keep turning the water up, and that stupid fly--not the fly, but the frog--will boil in that water because it's so hard to realize the incremental steps of you being cremated. And that's what happens in this country. By the time we look at [Adolf] Hitler, that's a European problem. By the time we look at some of these other dictators, these are things that happen someplace else. They don't happen here.

George--I forgot his last name--Coventry--I think that's his last name--told me that, "Maur"--he was the Communications Director at the Water Department, and he told me, "Maureen, you don't have to worry about people getting sick. Americans don't get sick like that." That's this American exceptionalism, and here we all are in the pot and they're turning it up, and turning it up, and the heat is there, and the heat is there. The lesson of Highland Park said we have to alert the frog that if the water is getting warmer, you might need to get out of the pot and do something. If nothing else, turn the flame down. That was the lesson. By the time that flame got to Detroit, it took a long time for people to understand that you gonna die if you don't do something about this and half the people did die. They couldn't make it stop. Police Department lost their pensions, Fire Department lost their pensions, city workers lost their pensions. All this kind of stuff was going on. People being foreclosed on, horrible tax problems and people losing their homes

left and right, waiting for somebody to come and save them while the water getting warmer and warmer.

And that was the lesson and we--I understood it, but most folks didn't get it. And now, here we are with 800,000 people--eight and a half people in Highland Park--and here we are with our homes in danger, our water in danger, our sisters and brothers up in Flint [Michigan] being told, "Why don't you drink the water? I know it looks funny, and it smells funny, but we have it on good authority that it's okay," and they still don't have any pets in Flint 'cause all of the pets that drank the water died.

The lesson is: Pay attention to what's happening in the communities that look like yours. And I'm not talking about where there are Black people or where there are white people, where there are Latinos or where there are Sikhs or where there are Jews, all, the whole nine yards. Pay attention to bad things that happen where somebody else lives because there are no barriers between whoever that is coming to your house. Here's a guy that drove eight or nine hours, drive all the way to Texas to kill women and children. Hmm. Why can't somebody drive here and do the same thing? All of Welfare Rights is on the alert, all across the country. Pay attention because there is a...an environment, an atmosphere of turning the water up everywhere, and you have to pay attention. The lessons of Highland Park are critical to the survival of working-class people. If you don't get that lesson, you gonna stay your stupid butt in that pot and you gonna boil. That's the lesson.

[1:13:09]

PB: So when you...you sat down in that restaurant in 2014 and you saw that list of 59,000 addresses to be shut off, what was your and Welfare Rights' first move to alert people that the heat was getting turned up on the pot?

MT: We started having press conferences. We started calling members of the People's Water Board--it's a coalition of about 30 or 40 people. Lila Cabbil--she just passed away not too long ago--we got Lila. Alice Jennings, one of our attorneys, we called her. We got everybody mobilized. We started to have

emergency meetings here [gestures to interview space, Central United Methodist Church in Detroit] and in different churches and whatnot, tried to reach out to the churches--difficult task there 'cause churches are, so many of them, are under the thumb of government assistance, so hard to get the churches involved up front. But we put out information online, we put out information on radio broadcasts that Marian [Kramer] and I manage every Friday at WHPR and we started talking about it. It's coming. You have to do something. It's coming. You have to do something. Message went out to the United Nations, monies started to come in. People were donating money. We had Welfare Rights members in Korea. They read what was happening. The Korean children sent three cases of Korean water to Detroit.

I--we were everywhere and talking about this issue. There were no places or no opportunities or no mechanisms or media opportunities that we passed. Probably one of the more interesting ones was a Canadian young woman and her significant other that sent me an e-mail message and said, "We're bringing money and we're in the Northern Territories." I didn't know where that was, so I said, "Well, where?," you know. "Oh, that's in Canada." And I, "Well, okay. You don't have to come all the way here. I'll meet you at the border, or a little further." She said, "Do you know where the Northern Territories are?" I told her, "Well, no." She says, "Well, we're north of Greenland." And I stopped her, I said, "Only God is north of Greenland. Where the hell you--where do you live?" She says, "It's gonna take about four days 'cause you have to go by dogsled, you have to go by bus, then we gonna rent a car." So, I told her, "There's no point in me meeting you at the border 'cause by the time you get there, you just come on into Detroit so I can buy you a corned beef sandwich and whatever else it is that you need." But she heard about this all the way in the Northern Territories.

So, we got to everybody, snail mail, door-to-door, social media, radio, television, interviews. We were on MSNBC, we were on CNN. The United Nations, when they publicized their final--well, it was a pre-report and then a post-report, and when they published it on their website, [makes explosion noise] the world went crazy 'cause everybody read it. Phone calls were coming, checks were coming in, we were paying people's water bills off, all this kind of stuff. And then Victor Mercado [Mercado] was arrested for charging thousands of dollars for water faucets, and he went to jail in Texas, and I was looking for his address so I could send him a sandwich, but I never could get his address. But we...we left no stone unturned.

Multiple court cases, federal court cases, local court cases, we did everything, and we were able to get that message spread throughout...throughout the United States of America and beyond, that there's a beast and this beast is in Detroit, this beast is in Highland Park, and the son of the beast is up in Flint, and if the beast can develop here, that beast can go wherever they want. So, everybody in America, for the longest time, was very aware about this water struggle. Highland Park.

[1:17:22]

PB: And, I know there was the initial victory there, right, where the short-term moratorium on the shutoffs...

MT: First time that it ever happened. The courts granted a short-term stay of execution, we were calling it, where water would not be shut off while the Water Department regrouped and tried to figure out what they could do 'cause they were [air quotes] "being painted" as the new fascists. So we got that victory, and then we ended up in federal court and Judge Steve [Rhodes] was there, and he ruled against us. And in his statement, what he said was, "I know that this statement is going to be at the basis of property being destroyed, families being destroyed, families being made sick, and folks are going to die, but I don't want to do anything to interfere with the city of Detroit's process of bankruptcy." Stunning. He said it and he wrote it. He said it and he wrote it. So, even though we had good lawyers and bad laws, worse judges, we couldn't get it. We couldn't get a solid victory of installing like a water affordability plan because the courts side with the city government and corporations, so we can't get it past them.

[1:18:53]

PB: So...we have like five minutes left.

MT: Mmmhmm.

PB: I want to ask maybe two more questions, if we have time.

MT: Okay. Okay.

PB: So, you said, you said that, you know, you left no stone unturned. Everybody and their cousin was here in Detroit, the whole world was watching and...

MT: Yes.

PB: ...yet, the water shutoffs persist. So, what, what's the takeaway here? What more... Is there anything more that organizers could be doing in this city, or what, like, what lessons do we draw that put all of this time, all of this work, this massive mobilization together, and it still wasn't...

MT: Mmmhm.

PB: ...able to stop the shutoffs?

MT: The lesson learned in that scenario--well, we learned lessons every step of the way. We always stopped to summarize what has happened, what good, what bad. But the lesson that many of us across the nation, across the world learned is that governments don't listen to ordinary people, and that the fact the the voters decide we want these things to happen, we don't want assault rifles, we don't want...whatever it is, they don't listen. They do listen to gun manufacturers. That's important, money. They do listen to private companies that have money and the ability to control public water. They do listen to that. That lesson was about the place where corporations live in your life and, you know, whatever your household situation is, whatever your income situation is, working-class people are one paycheck away from trouble. Corporations have no interest in people suffering, and they will form collaboratives with governments who you voted for to get

what's best for them. That's a hard lesson. People see it and understand it and heard it, but it's hard to...hard to label what I just saw is what I just saw.

Richard Pryor went to a hotel where his wife--well, let...let me say it a different way 'cause we have cameras here. Richard Pryor's wife went to a hotel where Richard Pryor and another woman were involved, and she got there, and she knocked on the door. "Let me in, let me in." And Richard gave those special words, "Are you gonna believe what I tell you, or are you gonna believe your lyin' eyes?" And this lesson that people have now come to understand is very difficult. When your history books say the people have the right to vote what they want and the people are the most important, by the people, for the--those things are not true. Those things are not true. That's the big takeaway. All of this international mobilization, people sending money, we're paying water bills all over the place. It didn't matter. We could not stop the grass--the, the, the Great Lakes Water Authority. We could not--we...we got longer periods of moratorium that are still in place now, but the Water Department believes that it has the right to disconnect water if you don't pay for it, and I don't know where that came from. There is no such law, but they create it, this concept, if you don't pay, we can turn it off. And we have not been able to be successful--yet--of getting people to see that that doesn't fly. You are still human beings, and there are certain inalienable rights that we are supposed to have. Big lesson.

[1:23:00]

PB: Mmmm. What's--I'll ask you two more questions, one being can you just say something about Mama Lila [Cabbil]'s legacy 'cause she helped to start this project with us and that's one thing I've been asking everybody is, like, if you could just kind of speak a few words about that?

MT: Dances with Wolves and...and the statement that came, Kicking Bird, and...and some of these other conversations and the one line that I always quote from that: "I'm not the thinker that Kicking Bird is." And see, I'm angry, tearing up now. When Lila--we were together a week before she passed away, and we can't afford to lose her--and I...I'm not going to change that to say we couldn't afford, I'm saying it in present tense, we *can't* afford to lose her. Her courage, her

tenacity, she would give them long prayers--oh Lord, we'd be telling her to put an amen to that damn thing and...and... But she would call in all of the spirits and whatnot to help, to help and to support, and to support, and to guide, and to guide, and she would do all those things. We can't replace that and...and there's a hole in individual hearts. It's a hole in the movement that we can't recover. Six months before she passed, her mother had made a transition. We went there to say goodbye to her mom and, you know, Lila's been gone about six months and her husband just passed away, just days ago, it's just too much. We can't replace the Lila Cabbils, we can't, and there are a lot of folks that pass away involved in this movement and whatnot, but she had a footprint that was a whole lot bigger than most. The only thing we can do is to close ranks around and say our prayers and wipe up our tears, and we can't stop. We can't stop. We have to have to continue to go forward, and she's never gone. She's, like Mos Def used to say, Lila died but she won't stay dead long, yeah.

PB: Thank you.

MT: Mmhm.

PB: I want to leave us with looking into the future. What's your vision for the future of Detroit that guides your work?

MT: I'm not tired, and I still have faith, and I still have hope. I do believe that there are individuals in this city, in this county, in this state, and in this country, in this world, have a clear recognition of what righteousness looks like, what dignity looks like. And as long as we continue to describe what these things are supposed to look like, from the day that I can't take this fight another step, there gonna be somebody there to carry it on. I'm a social worker by trade, and one of my students told me just last week, "Miss Taylor, I didn't know you knew..." and he said a particular name, and he's in eleventh grade. And I said, "Oh, you know who that is?" "Yeah, I know very well. Whatever it is that I need to do for you, Miss Taylor, I'll do it, legal or illegal." Alright, that's all I need to hear, and I didn't even know him, and his message came by way of somebody else. So, as long as I keep talking, as long as Marian [Kramer] keeps talking, as long as you two [points at

interviewers] stay alive and come back with cameras every 40 years, it, it's gonna continue, and this message will not be lost. I have hope.