

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

Myrtle Thompson-Curtis

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER AND ORIANA YILMA

April 12, 2019

Detroit, Michigan

Narrator

Myrtle Thompson-Curtis grew up in Detroit, Michigan during the 1960s and 1970s. Along with her husband, Wayne Curtis, Myrtle is a co-founder of Freedom Freedom Growers and a Board Member of the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center. She lives on the Eastside of Detroit.

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.

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

Abstract

Myrtle Thompson-Curtis grew up in Detroit, Michigan during the 1960s and 1970s. Along with her husband Wayne Curtis, Myrtle is a co-founder of Freedom Freedom Growers, a non-profit urban garden that services the members of the Detroit community with cooking demonstrations and art and nutrition education. Myrtle is also a board member of the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership, a non-profit community center aimed at helping grassroots organizers and activists. Myrtle discusses growing up in Detroit, her involvement in Freedom Freedom Growers, the impact of the Chrysler Fiat plant and the collective bargaining agreement, and how the housing crisis directly and indirectly affected her.

Keywords

Barry Randolph; Church of the Messiah; Community benefits agreements; Detroit Eviction Defense; Detroit People's Platform; Detroit, Michigan; Education; Emergency management; Freedom Freedom Growers; Fiat-Chrysler ; Foreclosure crisis; Grace Lee Boggs; James and Grace Lee Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership; Lela Whitfield; School closings; School integration; Urban farming; Wayne Curtis

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Transcript of interview conducted April 12, 2019 with:

Myrtle Thompson-Curtis [MTC]

Detroit, MI

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

[Pre-interview discussion begins]

MTC: I walked to school, and there were days when I could walk by myself. I would not walk as an old woman through that neighborhood by myself right now. You know the story of Aiyana Jones? That she was killed two--one block over from Beniteau, and so that's that area. The schools over there...just...they're left to just... [sighs] I had family members who lived on St. Jean all the way up to Jefferson, and there was a street called Lycaste. They tore all of that out to create what's over there now. And so, when that man stood up and said that he was looking forward to--he wanted them to buy his house out, I was thoroughly done because that was one of the first things they said they were *not* doing. And, here you go--where did they find you at? Were you asleep the whole time? And so, for me, it's just...it always reflects back on: what are we doing as leaders or organizers? What is it that we need to be doing? What haven't we done? Why is this still going on? And why would somebody stand up in a meeting like that and ask for streetlights when there are so many other things that, you know.

PB: Are they [inaudible]? that green book? Rich [Feldman] gave me one of those green books that you put out. There's so much incredible material in there.

MTC: Mhm.

PB: I've heard-- so, we were breaking down afterwards and I was kind of eavesdropping on some of the conversations that were happening in that room because there was like three people left. I think one person was on the NAC [Neighborhood Advisory Council]. Some--a white guy with a beard--I don't know if he was with FCA [Fiat Chrysler Automobiles] or not. And then, a third guy, and one of the things that was coming up that was... I remember one of the guys saying, like, "Well, if they ask for free wi-fi that'd be one thing, but, like, this restorative justice or, like, makerspaces..." Like, they have no conception of--

MTC: They don't know what it is.

PB: Right, they don't know what it is, and they don't understand it in terms of dollars and cents. Like, free wi-fi makes sense for them because it's just plug and play to a degree. So, they had, like, no conception to what those asks were--

MTC: But, it-- so, we need to get Carlos (??) or Blair [Evans] in the room to explain what it is or some of these other folks who are actually involved in 3-D printing or design or just learning a different phase of technology. The data--the media data people in the room so they can understand what it's like because it's not that...it's not that far away, actually. If they go take a really good walk through the Chrysler Plant, they'll see everything we're talking about for real, for real. I mean...so, [sighs] I don't know. Church of [the] Messiah, they house makerspaces. I mean--do you know Jared Slaff (??)?

PB: No, I don't.

MTC: He started the--him, Jeff Sturges, and a couple folks, they left what they were doing, and now Jeff has his own plant in Detroit making shoes.

PB: Mmm.

MTC: So...

PB: Did they-- they came out of Church of Messiah?

MTC: They didn't come out of Church of the Messiah, but they came out of one of those makerspaces. [Inauble] shoes-- what's the name of his shoes? Pingree Shoes. Pingree Productions, something like that. They make these really nice leather goods, so. Maybe if we had folks like that explaining...

PB: Right.

MTC: ...what we're doing.

PB: Make it tangible.

MTC: Make it tangible. They don't know what a makerspace is.

PB: All they're hearing is like, ____?. It's like, earlier this week, they hear it's a bunch of hippie stuff, right? Like with the sustainable energy, like, they see it as the way far off, but not like you're saying, where this is like...

MTC: It's right there.

PB: Right on the cusp.

MTC: It's right there. Yeah. Okay.

[Pre-interview discussion ends]

OY: So, could you give us your name, where you live, and your organizations and affiliations?

[0:00:00]

MTC: Okay. My name is Myrtle Thompson-Curtis. I live on the East Side of Detroit [Michigan]. My organization, affiliation is Feedom Freedom Growers. I am Co-Founder and Program Director. I also sit as a member of the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center [to Nurture Community Leadership] Board. I'm a Board Member.

[0:00:26]

OY: Could you describe your neighborhood and the city growing up?

MTC: Sure. So, I was born in [19]62. So, my childhood is the [19]6[0s], [19]70s, and the [19]80s. Detroit was--for me and my childhood--was a good one, for the most part. I do recall my father worked at Chrysler. He was also a business person. He invested in real estate and some apartment buildings. I have four older brothers, so I came familiar with just the fringes of the Black Panther Party through them, just a little bit. I went to neighborhood schools. I walked to school. I remember the heroin crisis of the early [19]70s. There was a lot of the young people around that time were strung out on heroin and wine. The wine was always with them, yeah. I remember that, and I remember it was like the disco era came in. Everything was around have a good time. If it feels good, do it.

I was a teenager in high school. I remember the schools being integrated, and instead of being able to walk to my neighborhood high school, I had to catch two buses to go to Denby High School, which was then an all-white neighborhood maybe seven miles away from where I lived. That was traumatic. I didn't like it at all. Getting chased home from school wasn't fun. And by the time that I graduated

from Denby or came out of Denby, it was 80 percent Black. So, all the white folks moved out. So, we can't force folks to do what they don't want to do.

The school felt very... It was frustrating because most of the teachers there were trying to find their way out. They didn't want to be there any longer. And so, a lot of things that should have happened for me in high school didn't. I became disinterested. I finished up but... I became a part of a General Motors Training Program in high school. Never had a desire to work in a factory or a plant, just didn't cross my mind. And so, I went on to business school. And soon after that, I got married and became a mom.

[0:03:04]

OY: How has your neighborhood or the city changed since then?

MTC: I remember my dad saying a long time ago that they were gonna take the city back, and who was this 'they,' I couldn't tell you. "They're coming back," he said, "all the amenities and the water and everything is here. They're coming back for the city." But in the [19]80s, the late [19]80s, for me, I saw the crack epidemic. And, before the crack epidemic is--was like jobs were leaving. People were scrambling. Housing was becoming more. People were taking out these big, giant loans and stuff, and it was just like everybody seemed to be gambling.

But during that time, I was out of school, going into higher education, starting relationships, soon to become a mom. But if I look back from where today until then, it's been a definite decline in population. That's been dated, documented. Jobs, the type of jobs. Schools. The only school that I went to that still remains is Denby High School, and it's totally different from when I left there. The elementary school I went to is now African-centered school in a very disinvested neighborhood. It's right behind where the Chrysler Plant is.

People who are--people are leaving the city who I never thought would leave to go across into the suburbs, the poorer suburbs, Macomb County [Michigan]. A lot

of people have left to go down south in Texas, for whatever reason. But, to see Downtown thrive is nothing new. We saw it in the [19]70s. To see Midtown catch a lot of money is nothing new. But, for me, when I think about the--I mean, it's just I've seen it all. I've seen it. I'm 56 years old. I've seen it come. I've seen it go. Now, I'm just watching to see the fall off, but it looks like because of so many people are making space and being pushed out, the fallout might take a little longer, so.

[0:06:02]

OY: What do racism and oppression look like in Detroit today?

MTC: Money Downtown, money in Midtown, money in Corktown, not enough for the neighborhoods, which are predominantly Black. Schools close, disinvestment, housing foreclosure, outright--folks are outright duped, and nobody went to jail. More money in prisons and jails instead of schools and restorative justice centers. [sighs] I could keep going, but I'll stop right there.

[0:06:53]

OY: So, how did you first become active in movement work?

MTC: I first became active through urban agriculture, and that was 10, 11 years ago. And, that's because of who my husband [Wayne Curtis] is-- not because of who is he, but the practice and the influence that he shared with me, the writings and readings and things like that. You know, honestly, I think I became active when I became a mom because then I started looking at life differently. But, really involved in community organizing in 2008, 2009 when we decided to have a garden so that we could grow community. And by grow community, I mean create a space where we were--eat healthy and be better neighbors and be involved on the forefront of what was happening, so.

[0:07:55]

OY: What or who have been some of the greatest influences in your political thought and organizing work?

MTC: Great question. Wow...Wow. Dang, everybody I meet these days who is doing something. I'm going to say Wayne Curtis, Dr. Gloria House, Malik Yakini, Grace Lee Boggs, the writings of her husband, Jimmy Boggs, bell hooks, [sighs] Harriet Tubman, Ron Scott--Oh my goodness... Octavia Butler, Alice Walker, Angela Davis. Oh my goodness, so many. Barbara Ransby, Shea Howell, Rich Feldman, Julian Bond. I can keep going on, almost everybody I've met. They've been very influential, but the greatest I think is Grace Lee Boggs, Angela Davis, Wayne Curtis.

[0:09:34]

OY: Where do you see the legacies and influences of James and Grace Lee Boggs in current organizing activist work in Detroit?

MTC: Where do I see it? You mean physically?

OY: Physically, or how do you see it?

MTC: I see a great manifestation of their work at the James and Grace Lee Boggs School. I mean, that's a physical manifestation of their work, their philosophy. Also, as a board member and at the center, the conversations and the work that happens from that space. I see the influences in so many folk in ways--hence the t-shirt, so. I mean, I just meet so many people who are connected with the Boggs Center or who carry those humanistic values--the values of the importance of relationships and the work, the theory, and the practice. You can't have one without the other. They go hand in hand, so. I mean, but the school, I think that physical manifestation. Also, the work I do as a Freedom Freedom Grower has been greatly influenced by the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center.

[0:10:53]

OY: How have your communities been impacted by the housing and foreclosure crisis?

MTC: Say that again?

OY: How has your community been influenced by the housing and foreclosure crisis?

MTC: Directly...this is painful. [pause] I've been affected directly. I had neighbors who had to leave their house because they were renting. They were buying a home, and the mortgage company they were paying their money to was not paying their taxes and sold the house underneath them, from underneath them. And, they had to fight, and they lost. And so now, they're part of a class action lawsuit. And, the people who are taking over the house turned it into an Airbnb, and now they left. And so now, the house that my old neighbors put over 10,000 dollars into is sitting vacant. And once again, we have a vacant space on our corner. The windows are busted out now because somebody keeps going in and out. I had neighbors across the street who took out one of the predatory loans. They were elders. She had a heart attack after they had to move. A woman from China bought the house. She said she's going to move into it, but she didn't. And so, they're trying to rent it out for like a thousand dollars, and they didn't put \$1,000 worth of work in it, for real.

One of my neighbors had to fight Fannie Mae. Her mom died, and the city did not want her to stay in the house. So, she made them an offer, and they refused it. So, she went to Detroit Eviction Defense. And with the help of Freedom Freedom, Detroit Eviction Defense, some attorneys, and a big old array of community members, she fought and won, but it took three years. And, that was just one victory out of so many. You know, people would knock on my door and say, "I got this notice. What am I to do?" I say, "Don't leave your house." And, I remember one of the politicians...one of the politicians...I think it was Elizabeth Warren who

was telling people, "Don't leave your house!" And I told her, "Don't leave your house," and she ended up not having to move. She fought. It was just a matter of--we get these notices on our doors, these yellow bags. They tell you you're late, your house is foreclosed on, and people get scared.

I got a picture in the mail of one of my properties. It's the 291 Community Project House, and it's being renovated. And so, somebody sent me a card with a picture on it and said, "I want to buy your home," and I was insulted. So, I called them. I said, "Where are you?" And he said, "I'm in New Jersey." And, I was like...I was just like... I was fuming. So, I said, "Don't you ever...ever..." I said, "My house wasn't listed for sale. There's not a sale sign on the door. Don't call my house. Don't call--I mean, don't send me a picture of my home and tell me you want to buy it. That's insulting. That is just--that's terrible. So disrespectful," and I come to find out I wasn't the only one.

So, immediately in my neighborhood-- I'm by the water, down by on the South side, Jefferson, straight downtown West, Grosse Pointe [Michigan] two blocks east. And so, I'm in one of those areas where it's like 100,000 dollar homes on that side, 1,000,000 dollar home right here. My block, the average house is like 20,000 dollars, but it's like super, super desirable to be over in that area right now. And so, we're catching it on all fronts. Our water bill has skyrocketed, our taxes are skyrocketing, and the lots that are next door--because it's like 22 houses on my block. My block is a mile long. So, it's like now to afford a lot, it takes a little bit more work, where they were just letting adjacent--you buy the adjacent lot. You could buy the adjacent lot. You can buy, like, two over, two behind you, two in front of you. Not anymore. So, we've been affected directly. There's no reward for sticking and staying through all of it. There's no accreditation for your lived experience in the city. So... [sighs] And still, we don't have the amenities of a big city.

[0:15:51]

PB: So, Shea [Howell] told us a little bit about that fight over by Ms. Whitfield's house.

MTC: Mhm.

PB: Could you tell us some of that story? You can only give us, like, the broad accounts or...

MTC: Well, I got to know Lela [Whitfield] through--and I might refer to her as Denise, so, alright. We came...we became neighbors and buddies over the garden. She liked fresh tomatoes, heirloom tomatoes. We grow heirloom tomatoes. So through that relationship, she felt comfortable enough to come to me after many, many months of sitting on this news that she may lose her house--her mother's home. Her mother had died suddenly of cancer. So, I knew Carmen [Regalado] and the fight for the Hernandez's home in Southwest, and I sent her to a meeting. I said, "Go there. These people may be able to help you. Let me know." And so, she went. She wasn't--she was like, "I don't know." I said, "Don't give up. Nothing that you really want is easy. You've got to fight."

And so over the process, me and some of the folks from DED [Detroit Eviction Defense], we came up with ways to support Lela. Going to court. Every time somebody came to the garden, I gave them one of the flyers and asked them to call. Call Fannie Mae. Make a call. Sign up on this list of what you might be able to do to help--fundraise, attend an event, go to court, make a phone call, and--see, every summer, we had these busloads of folks who'd come and tour the garden, have conversation, work, lunch, or whatever, and I would all--give them all flyers. We would talk about Lela's case. And then, the news got involved. And then, Al Jazeera got involved, and they were just articles.

And so, one of the biggest things that happened though--and even though it's a small thing now--was--we were prepared for anything that might happen. And so, Lela's house, there's a lot on each side. And so, she kept getting a threat that the dumpsters would be coming out. And so, we had to create a wall. I said, "She needs protection." And so, somebody donated old fencing, and they--there became a wall, and other artists created this beautiful mural on the wall, and that's what got the attention of folks. They would slow down. We had a little thing. There were flyers in it to get information--because Lela had a lot of shame

about this, just like a lot of people. Your water's cut off, you don't want to go telling everybody you ain't got no water. You have a job, you don't want to go around telling everybody you couldn't make your bills. So, the shame that came with it kind of kept her from talking about it, but we persuaded her. You need to tell folks. You know, a squeaky wheel gets the grease. You know, so. It became public knowledge, and there were a lot of phone calls.

And when she went back to court the final time, she had a lawyer who was familiar--I would say she's a judge...a judge for the people, and she said, "We're not going any further with this. This is it," and she gave an ultimatum. And, they offered Lela the very same offer she gave them from the start after three years. But, what really persuaded her to fight was the attorney [laughs]--foolish man. He said to Lela at the end of one of the court sessions, "In like a lion--In with a roar, out with a whimper," and that got under her skin. I guess underneath all that, she's really a fighter.

And so, we had a music concert to drum up funds, which was a success. We had barbecues. I mean, we did everything that we could to support her, but it took a lot. It took a lot. It took a lot for her to continue going. It took a lot for us. And, that was one of the reasons why my neighbors would come to me because they knew of our support of her situation, you know, and to be there is an honor, but, you know, it's a lot of work. And so, our neighborhood has been affected. There were houses torn down that could've been refurbished like the one that we're doing. Lot more green space. So.

[0:20:21]

PB: So, that's a win, right? We count that?

MTC: That's a win.

PB: That's a win.

MTC: Yep.

PB: So, what lessons do we draw--or do you draw--from that win in terms of, like, from an organizing perspective?

MTC: It takes everybody. We cannot afford to be in silos. It was not just DED [Detroit Eviction Defense]. It was not just the [National] Lawyers Guild. It was the community on the grass. It was the folks who were in the universities. It was the folks who happened to drive by. Everybody participated. So, working in silos doesn't...doesn't--we need everybody in this fight today 'cause the movement has to broaden itself. It has to be more broad. That's what I took away. And, the diligence. I mean, it didn't feel like three years, but when we look back at it from start to finish, it was three years.

So... [sighs] I don't know how to--I don't know, still, how to get people to let go of the shame of a situation that they did not solely create. So, this is from the soul. I don't know the right word. It creates that shameful attitude that you are inadequate if you can't meet all these rigorous, unrealistic demands that are placed on just you. And so, here was Lela fighting well-paid lawyers, Fannie Mae, the judicial system. It was a big fight, and there's no way she could've done it by herself. So, we kind of put those in perspective also when dealing with adversity. Putting things in perspective. So, that's one of the lessons.

[0:22:12]

PB: One of the things--one of the questions we had in mind is... Like you said, I think encouraging folks to work through that shame or to kind of think beyond that current crisis moment.

MTC: Mhm.

PB: So, I'm wondering if you could talk a little about how you approach those conversations, whether that's in that particular fight or whether it's in your day-to-day work in Feedom Freedom. Like, how are you making work in--how are you making space inside your work to promote that kind of visionary mindset in that radical imagination?

MTC: I can think of one exercise we did with the young people. We do a youth enrichment program. And sometimes with young people, their short history, they have a few things they can draw from. There's not a lot. And so, taking...taking a piece of paper and looking at the lines on the paper and in the margins of the paper and putting a whole bunch of things in the wide piece of paper and then putting them on the margins on the paper, it gave them a picture, and it gives folks a picture of things that you have within your control and then all the stuff you don't have it, this is not in your control. And, it kind of like shifts. You can vision it.

And so, I'm not under any illusion of what I'm up against on a day-to-day, but having that conversa--having that conversation on a broader scale is difficult. I carry a lot of patience--and consciousness happens. Realizations come. I can't--as a group, we work collectively together. Inside the Boggs Center, we work collectively. I'm also part of--Feedom Freedom is part of National Black Food Justice Alliance, and I think there's a collective likeness. But outside of that, if the consciousness isn't there, then it's just carry a lot of patience and give concrete examples of where this newfound realization can be utilized. Okay.

[0:24:34]

PB: Could you tell us a little bit about the formation for the founding of Feedom Freedom?

MTC: Sure. Hey, granddaughter. [lifts child onto lap] So--she's right on time for that one--the foundation and the forming was 40 years of social justice activism work on behalf of Wayne Curtis, my partner, my husband, the Garden Resource Program [at Keep Growing Detroit], and all the knowledge that I have acquired of

what it means to be an organizer or activist. And basically, it's just trying to be a good neighbor, for real. Doing my part. And so, we joined the Garden Resource Program with 20 bucks, got some seeds because Wayne Curtis said there should be a garden here so we could eat healthy. He was worried about his blood pressure. I was worried about my...my own allergies and health. And so, it started out with very little long term--what it really might end up looking like. It's just like let's do it, and we'll see what...we'll see what blossoms. When you plant a flower, you don't know what might come up. You just random seeds. And so--but with his experience, art, that opened a venue. With my experience with cooking, so. It became what it is today, mhm.

[to granddaughter] Don't put that in your mouth.

[0:26:17]

PB: So, was that...was the garden in a side lot that you owned or that...

MTC: We didn't own it at the time. It was just covered with grass, tall grass, and we were responsible for keeping it cut down. And then, the three--the four next to it, the same. We were responsible. And to our left, it was a vacant--there was one lot, and there was a house. And so, it just seemed like a...it seemed like a good idea. I had no idea. I grew greens and tomatoes with my grandmother. Well, she grew. I was forced to go out and take spiders off and help her pick and things like that, so. I think my partner had a better idea of what we were doing than I did. I just had a lot of drive and a lot of willingness and the ability to organize somewhat, so that's what happened. And then, his history of you-know-what, so many different organizations in the city, and then going to learn a lot from DBCFSN [Detroit Black Community Food Security Network]. We got a lot of information and input and encouragement from that area. And, Grace [Lee Boggs] was a great influence and all her conversations about Detroit Summer, so.

[0:27:48]

PB: So, in those conversations that you're having with Baba Malik [Yakini] or with Grace Lee Boggs and others, how is your vision evolving from what the role--what the significance of this garden, this farming initiative? How is that growing?

MTC: I would say we went from just wanting to survive a season and produce a harvest festival to more art education, education nutrition, and cultural development in our neighborhood and our community. We're--I consider us a gateway to a political conversation in the garden. So, we went from trying to be this really big market garden to a place of education.

[0:28:42]

PB: So, what does that education look like? So when young people come by to the garden, can you kind of, like, put us in that space with you and, like, give us an idea about what that education looks like, that political education?

MTC: I can give you my piece, but there's other facilitators so they would have to give you their piece. I do a cooking and nutrition gardening workshop. So, I walk you through planting, and I walk you through harvesting. I walk you through prepping and creating a delicious meal out of what you actually grow. Or, I can shut fun down and really come down on you if you're not getting it in the garden. [laughs] So, my role as Mama Myrtle has been one of really directing. I don't allow junk food in the garden, and if you bring junk food or if you're sneaking or rattling paper like, that's when shit--fun gets shut down. And, I'll have you read. Whatever you're eating, I want to read. And half the time, folks can't even read what's on that paper. And so, it turns into a lesson, right then, right there. So, they get to understand. It's not out of shame, it's because I love you and I care for you. And if you don't know what it is, why are you participating in it? And so, that becomes a whole nother lesson. We also--we understand environmental justice in the garden and being a good steward.

So, that's my piece. Wayne Curtis would have to talk about the Emory Douglas family art program [Emory Douglas Youth and Family Arts Program]. Monique [Thompson] would talk to you about the spirituality of the four elements. Anthony

(??) would talk to you about the writer's workshops, and Paul (??) would talk to you about the restorative justice component, so. And, we also bring in facilitators. We also take tours. But if you spent the day at the garden, we would open up in conversation about--what time is it on the clock of the world, probably. We'll do some work. We refresh ourselves and probably do an honoring or something like that. So, yeah, that's kind of what a day would look like.

[0:31:02]

PB: What kind of growth have you seen in the young people that come by?

MTC: It varies. Some--I was just thinking about one young man...one young man who I'm watching now. He's actually working in a restaurant. Some are going on to college. Some have not fared so well. So, there's all over. One young person stayed with us up until her family moved away to Atlanta [Georgia]. She started off as a youth mentor and became one of our facilitators, so. We've had young people come through us through a visit and come back, and now they're a facilitator, so. For the most part, it's been a pleasure to watch folks grow and to run into folks and say, "You planted a seed in me. I haven't forgot." And on the other hand, it's been like, you know, some folks have not lived up to their potential that you saw in them. But, they have to go through what they have to go through to get to where they're going to be, so.

[0:32:08]

PB: So if I'm thinking about this historically, like, grocery stores, like, food has been a major, like, source of exploitation within Black communities, and, like, probably, like, the extraction of wealth out of things. Could you--I mean, is that, like, part of your consciousness of the role of Feedom Freedom within your community?

MTC: [sighs] Not at this point. That is a big...that's a big fight. I am very... I am really looking forward to another co-op to come to the city of Detroit. But right now, the full system--I look at what happened at the Eastern Market, and we had

so much hopes in the Eastern Market being a hub for local growers. Most of the local growers I know are looking outside of that at this point. Freedom Freedom has more found its niche in the education of political, social justice realm of ushering folks into a garden space where you can tap into the soil but also tap into your soul.

[0:33:33]

PB: So, what--I'm trying to get a sense for what the organizing landscape is like on the East Side.

MTC: [laughs] Me too.

MTC, OY, PB: [laughs]

PB: So, how--what's the role of the Boggs Center in Freedom Freedom? Like, how does Freedom Freedom interact with different organizations like Boggs Center or Church of the Messiah? Like, what kind of interactions are there?

MTC: We're cool. We support each other's work. We uplift. And by support, I mean if Messiah's doing something and folks from Freedom Freedom need to be there, they need to be there, and vice versa. I'll take a phone call and help plan if need be in whatever capacity, but Messiah is a church. I'm not a churchy person, so you won't catch me there on Sunday mornings. But as far as everything else, I have great respect for Pastor Barry [Randolph] and the work that goes on there. Wonderful programming.

And so--as well as other organizations in my area. There's the [Global] Treehouse Initiative. There's other growers. There's a for-profit grower. And with the Boggs Center, I learn a lot from conversations at the Boggs Center because there's a lot of experience there, a lot of years. And so, we get together and plan things. So--and part of--the tour is that, comes out of the Boggs Center that Freedom

Freedom participates in. So, there's a collective collaboration, I'll say. And if there's something that Pastor Barry would like to invite us to there, the Boggs Center--there are different members of the Boggs Center that make up the Board, and everybody does something different. And so, however that support should look like. Sometimes not as strong as it could be, but it's definitely a collaboration.

[0:35:46]

PB: So, is that kind of collaboration manifesting around the Fiat Chrysler CBA [community benefits agreement] right now?

MTC: Some of it. Out of the Boggs Center and Freedom Freedom, yes, definitely. And, that's--like I said, that started in January. [sighs] How do we organize with other groups? So, there's a lot on the East side. There are a lot of groups on the East side that I rounded up, and then there was a lot more work that still has to be done as far as the CBA, but it's such a short time frame. There was very little...there was very little...there was very little...there was very little time to really get deep with the Chrysler Ford CBA--Fiat-Chrysler CBA ordinance, so. We did the best that we could do. We--Women Creating Caring Communities brought folks to the room because of connections to union and things like that. But, the way it was handled through just that small impact area, that created almost a very small window for us to operate because I wasn't--I don't know if any...I don't know the organizations that were immediately coming out of that impact area, so.

[0:37:20]

PB: Could you talk a little bit about that survey that y'all put out and what you learned through that? And what that...

MTC: People want change. People were excited about every--almost everything that was on that list. And if you noticed, we didn't put community center or recreation center on there. There was something very close to it, but people were excited. And, to learn that folks would respond when called upon to voice their

opinion about what was going on in the city. And so, I think that fired up some folks--not enough, because they haven't had the formal presentations or the videos or something to go with it, but I think if a call was put out, we could really pull some folks to work towards an initiative outside of the Chrysler Ford, or even on behalf of that. I mean, what more could we ask for? So.

[0:38:21]

PB: So, was that survey kind of the basis for putting together that...that benefits plan proposal, that green book that you all put out?

MTC: I don't have privy to knowing that, and Jerry King was responsible for most of that literature. He drew it from some of the things that are happening already on the ground or things that we would like to enact. And so, I would think his voice was heard. I haven't had a chance to speak to him about it as far as what was on that list. But the very first meetings, a lot of folks spoke about those things that were on that list. And so, without a lot of detail though, that's what I'm seeing. There's not a lot of detail.

[0:39:05]

PB: Why do you think there's been a drop in the attendance in each of those successive meetings?

MTC: Because now is the work part. I guess they feel like there's nothing left for them to do. A lot of folks feel like Chrysler is going to do what they want to do anyway. The NAC [Neighborhood Advisory Council] is got. They're gonna handle it. A lot of folks, their property wasn't getting bought. They weren't endangered of losing anything or gaining anything, so. Folks are busy, you know. Who wants to sit up in one of those frustrating meetings and get more frustrated, you know? That's where the work is. I mean, I really wanted to see more young folks there who have school-aged children. That's what I wanted to see in the room. But, I understand

why they weren't there. Getting off work, children got homework, all these other things, side projects, stuff like that. So, I get it.

[0:40:03]

PB: Is there--let me rephrase this. How much, like, on-the-ground, like, door-to-door organizing is going on around the CBA?

MTC: Not enough. Not enough. There was one effort of the organization with Jerry King, myself, and Boggs Center. There was one effort. But, not enough. I did some flyering in my neighborhood, and that was before I knew we weren't the impacted area. And then, Jerry King actually went to that area. And so, there were a lot of mailers that went out. A lot of phone calls went out. But yeah, that can't beat door-to-door. Sometimes that's risky because everybody's steps [inaudible]. I did a lot of door-to-door. That is work, and that's the work most folks don't want to do. Oh my goodness, that's the work. That's it. That's the work. Yeah, because you get to meet people, you get to have these conversations, and it takes time.

[0:41:05]

PB: How are you feeling about--like, outside of, like, the particulars of the FCA, like, what kind of insights are you gleaning just from the CBA process in general?

MTC: I feel like we really didn't vote for the ordinance that's on the books right now, especially the area that I'm from. Learned that through the [Detroit] People's Platform information, and I feel like, at this point--and I might have spoke a little bit to it earlier--that it's becoming one of those things that's pinpointed to where the corporations have already figured out how they're gonna--what they're gonna do and how they're gonna go around it, so. I mean, we've gotta keep switching it up. [laughs] This is how I feel. I mean, so it doesn't become this comfortable thing to think and manipulate and operate because they have man hours and time and money to...to...to make it fit right where they want it. I mean, they go into a new community--really, what can a community ask for that we're not going to do? I

mean, they want to ask--most of the requests look the same. Most of, you know... I don't know.

They're just more organized, have more money, and can play with things a little bit further. They spend how many months talking about it before you even woke up and realized what was going on. And then, we have to--you know, we started in January. They probably started the January before that. So, I feel like the CBA ordinances that's on the books is not the one we really wanted. It's the one the city wanted. And so, we're already behind the eight ball.

[0:43:01]

PB: What I saw was the Detroit People's Platform had a fairly strong presence in the last...

MTC: Mhm.

PB: ...CBA meeting. What kind of role had they played in this so far?

MTC: Gregg [Newsom] was one of the persons I wanted because he's an impacted area, but I understand Gregg's reason for not. I totally get it. To be part of the NAC, I get it. But, they've been--Linda Campbell, I mean, Detroit People's Platform and the folks they have in the room I think are invaluable, you know, as far as dedicating a lot of time and data to put that utilization in that space and that time has been very useful. That last forum that they gave us, I tried to give to one of the ladies. [laughs] "The map?" She was like, "I got that." "And did you read it?" And she was like, "I got it. I got it. I got it." And I was like, "Oh, gosh." So yeah, the information that was on there, who's in--who's in the impacted area. They headed down to the people, everything. So, they've been invaluable this whole time. I've stood with Detroit People's Platform on a number of issues.

PB: I saw that. She just brushed you off so quickly, it seemed like.

MTC: I didn't try to make her look foolish.

PB: Right.

MTC: I wasn't. I was like, "Here you go, here's the map." She said, "I got that." I was like, "...Okay." So then, that separates her from the people. So, that's why I said what I said, "Is the NAC really together?"--when I had an opportunity to stand up.--"I don't see it." And, I feel like Jerry [King] and the other guy, the other guy on the end, they might be up there by themselves, wishing for something. They have no idea. Because the first guy who spoke, he was up there talking about his father in Texas and all this long drawn-out story, and we shouted out from the back, "Where's your question? What are you talking about?" And so, it was like... That was a little frustrating right off the top, so. But, anyway.

[0:45:14]

PB: So, I'm thinking about just like an alternative possibility. So like, let's say that the NAC would have consisted of visionary folks from the impact zone, like, folks who want to see things like makerspaces. Like, say there's that cohesive--or, do you still think that the NAC would have the ability to advocate on behalf of...

MTC: Certainly, I think it would. I think...yes. Only because if you got all the folks on the same page, it would be more concise and precise. You don't have to spend time...you don't have to spend time persuading the other folks what it is because they already know, and they can really hone in on this is the first thing that we want. We want this campus over, ba ba ba ba ba. We don't want every--all these minute little things, we want this. We would like to see this. We would like to see this. But, no, they have to convince her first, her, him, him, the people sitting at the table who are worried about bike lanes. [pause] Okay. I see where we are. So, yeah. And, I'm being very optimistic. I'm being very optimistic, and only because it's probably one of those things Chrysler was not even on their radar or focus, but the money is already there. Why...why not? You don't--do they have--I don't

understand. They have a--say 100 dollars gets spent. If you got this pot of money and the folks can really regulate where it's going, why not be okay with that? Anyway, I don't...I don't know. I don't belong in them circles because I don't fit well, so. [laughs; coughs]

[0:47:15]

PB: Should we keep going about the CBA or should we pivot? It's about ten to one--no, ten to two, sorry.

MTC: Go ahead.

PB: Alright. Could you tell me a little bit about--from your experience, from your vantage point in your neighborhood--what the impacts from emergency management were on the city, in your neighborhood?

MTC: Oh, wow. Like, I remember meeting with Mayor [Dave] Bing before he actually had to step in as mayor. And then, we got the [Mike] Duggan thing, and it was all around that time. That's when things were like--everybody was like--it felt like somebody just threw papers up in the air before they could land. A lot of stuff happened, and then they settled when Mayor Duggan got in office because that's when it lands. Hand fighting was happening, and they decided, okay, give everybody the lot next to him. Garbage was running good, and just everything was still up in the air, and now things are settling to what they're going to be.

So, I remember the worst part of that, for me, was the school crisis in our area. The schools were dropping like flies. I think that was the hardest impact because we were all fighting for a neighborhood school that closed. I remember that being the most devastating aspect of the emergency manager situation. And what's going to happen to these houses? There were people going around collecting information as to what was a blighted house.

[0:48:56]

[Video stops]

MTC: That's my phone. Sorry, I didn't mean to. Can we stop for a second? I need to take this.

PB: Mhm.

MTC: Okay.

[Recording cuts out]

[Recording cuts in]

MTC: I do a pot in the morning, and then I do some from out--like till like this, snip, snip, snip, snip. Snip, snip. I'm surviving off, like, two to three hours of sleep a day because he won't let me sleep. He won't let me sleep. So, I had to stop.

PB: So, would you just be sitting up, or would you keep working yourself?

MTC: Oh no, I'd be relaxed. I watch the--I'm a news junkie as well. Catching up on emails at three in the morning, watching the news, laying down trying to sleep [laughs]. Eyes closed, I lay down, but I get a couple hours sleep and write. I keep my journal next to my bed, books.

PB: Richard sent me an email at, like-- I had it at, like, 4:15 in the morning the other day. I was like, "Richard, what are you doing? Go to bed."

MTC: Grace-- I travel with Grace and she'd be up at 4 o'clock in the morning waiting, ready for a cup of coffee. Just sitting there, like... "Good morning," "Oh, I've been up for a while" [laughs]. Goodness gracious. Reading the papers and stuff. I don't function well when it's dark out, I just be real quiet and, you know, stuff like that, but you've got to sleep. But, I went to bed last Saturday at 8:30. And I got a full night of sleep, thank goodness, so, it's kicking back in. And I full-time keep my granddaughters. So I have two, her and her sister.

PB: How do you like spending so much time with your Grandma?

MTC: [laughs] She gets away with murder. She gets away with murder.

[Video resumes]

[0:48:57]

PB: [laughs] Could you talk a little bit about that fight to save--to try to save the school in your neighborhood during emergency management?

MTC: Typical of many of the other fights. There were a lot of meetings at the school board building. There were a lot of meetings at our neighborhood. There were protests. Giving the notification that the school might be closing. You don't really know. Then you get the notification that the school is definitely closing. No update as to where the children are going. Lots of frustration. And, one of my neighbors was the spearhead on that fight, and I joined in. That's when I moved over in that area. And, she immediately said, "You gotta help. We need all hands on deck with this one." That's pretty much my participation in it and seeing the first aspects of devastation in the neighborhood. The children, where are they going? What's going to happen? What preparations have to be made? And then, the next school closing.

It was too many at one time to really just get a grip on it, for me, because all my grandchildren were small, and the ones that were in school were in the African-centered school that they were being driven to school. And so, I didn't really get full effect until I found out that school was closing. But as a parent and a grandparent, you basically try to make arrangements for your children. At the same time, trying to get some sense out of the board. There's all this money. Where is it at? And, not getting any specific answers. And so, the frustration is just...mounting. One thing after another, so.

[0:50:52]

PB: Which school was that?

MTC: One was Carstens [Elementary-Middle School], which ended up becoming another school. That was Guyton [Elementary School] and then Nsoroma [Institute]. Nsoroma was the African-centered school. Guyton was the school around the corner from us, and there were sparks--I mean, Stark Elementary [School] around the corner from us. So then, Remus Robinson [Middle School] became Carstens Elementary.

PB: Remus Robinson was one of the first Black superintendents of the schools, right?

MTC: Mhm.

PB: It's like a visual reminder. That seems like a deep signifier. I would take it. Anyways...

MTC: [laughs]

PB: How was the neighborhood impacted by the schools closing?

MTC: People started moving out when their kids don't have a school. You need to make strong arrangements for your children--I'm getting a cough here. [coughs] I do know families who moved. And then, you wonder about who's moving in because there's no schools. And then, the quality of education--we have one school around the corner--I'm getting a strong cough.

[0:52:21. Jump cut]

PB: How would you describe--or, can you talk a little bit about some of the visions that are guiding...visions for the future of Detroit that are guiding the work?

MTC: Alternative energy. Some of the visions are a more inclusive city. Hopefully, building better relationships with the city structure. They keep having these meetings and inviting community members, and one day they'll get it. So, maybe when they have a woman that's mayor of the City of Detroit with the funders that come to the City of Detroit really investing in the grassroots organizations that are doing some of this on the ground work would be awesome in the city. But, I don't plan on going anywhere soon. I would love for a younger aspect of Freedom Freedom to take over--I don't mean takeover, but really drive the vehicle, so. With all this change and development happening for the grassroots work to be taken as development and not just big businesses and corporations to be appreciated. [coughing continues]

[0:53:44. Jump cut]

PB: Let's leave you here. So, say young people are--say people are watching this, or clips of this interview, and they're inspired by what Freedom Freedom's doing, and they want to get involved. How can people be supporting Freedom Freedom growers?

MTC: People can support Freedom Freedom Growers through liking us on Facebook, messaging us on Facebook, emailing mzthompson@msn.com, emailing freedomfreedomgrowers@gmail.com, financial donations, physical volunteering, or joining us at one of our membership meetings.

PB: Is there anything else that you'd like to get on the record, or is there anything we missed?

MTC: I am we.

PB: Thank you.

MTC: You're welcome.