

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

RASHIDA TLAIB

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER

July 22, 2019

Detroit, MI

Narrator

Rashida Tlaib was born and raised in southwest Detroit, Michigan. She worked as a community activist and organizer for ACCESS (Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services) before becoming a staffer for State Representative Steven Tobocman. When term limits prevented Tobocman from running again, she ran for his seat and served as a representative in the Michigan State House from 2009 to 2012. She was elected to the United States House of Representatives in 2018, where she currently serves as the Congresswoman for Michigan's Thirteenth District.

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

Congresswoman Tlaib discusses her childhood in southwest Detroit, her parents, how her Palestinian identity has shaped her worldview and politics, her work with ACCESS (Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services) as an organizer on immigration issues, her work as a staffer for State Representative Steven Tobocman, why she decided to run for office, how to stay rooted in the community while serving in Congress, her "inside-outside" approach to politics, how corporations profit at the expense of people, and the interconnectedness of social justice movements. She also gives her advice for young activists and her vision for the city of Detroit. Specific topics include how she dealt with petroleum coke found on the riverfront during her time as a state representative, her Boost Act, discrimination in car insurance, and how the emergency management, bankruptcy of Detroit, and the Flint water crisis were forms of voter suppression and white supremacy.

Keywords

Boost Act; Car insurance; Detroit bankruptcy; Detroit, Michigan; Emergency management; Environmental justice; Flint water crisis; Flint, Michigan; Immigration; Shelli Weisberg; Steve Tobocman; United States House of Representatives

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Transcript of interview conducted July 22, 2019 with:

Rashida Tlaib [RT]

Detroit, MI

By: Peter Blackmer [PB]

RT: Detroit [Michigan]'s like a mother. You ever think of her that way? I always think of her as a her, as a she--she's a she, and she's a mother. She takes the sick, the poor, and then she makes them stronger, and says go, my children.

PB: So, thank you for making the time to speak with us. Could you please just give us your name, where you live, and your title?

RT: [nods] Sure. Rashida Tlaib. I live in Detroit, in the thirteenth congressional district, and I am a United States Congresswoman. That's still weird to say. [laughs]

[0:00:35]

PB: I can imagine.

RT: Yeah.

PB: Could you describe what your neighborhood was like growing up and some ways that you've seen the neighborhood change since then?

RT: Yeah. So, I was born and raised in southwest Detroit and I always tell folks, I mean, I just always remember that I was a little bit different, because we were...we lived on Norman Street, which was right near Patton Park and Woodmere Cemetery, those were the main areas, and Vernor and Springwells Corridor. And, I mean, it was...it was great because I know now, what I know now is that it was really diverse and that I was blessed to have grown up in an area where, you know, I met people from different backgrounds, even twenty different ethnicities in the community. I went to a predominantly-Black high school, very much again exposing myself to different movement work because of that, and I think it very much shaped the kind of person that I am today, and the...even a mother to my two children that I am today, and making sure that they're surrounded by the real America, is what I like to call it.

[0:01:41]

PB: What do racism and white supremacy look like in Detroit today?

RT: I don't know if it's...if it...I never think of it as in Detroit. I know nationally what it looks like for movement makers here. I mean, for us, we see the need to kind of activate--especially young people--to get motivated against this hate agenda. But it's...it's painful still, even though it may not be here right at the, you know, local city hall that these words are being said, but it is the White House, it's the White House lawn, and that still very much shakes blocks within Detroit and throughout the community, and it's very painful. For some, it's a sense of belonging. And when, you know, the most powerful position in the country is saying, you know, not only me, but to so many others that they don't belong in, through words and through policy and actions.

[0:02:43]

PB: You mentioned activating young people. How did you first get activated in movement work?

RT: I don't know. You know when I, everybody always asks, like, when did it happen? I mean, I think being the eldest of fourteen in itself was...I was the social worker in the home. I was the advocate. When people would, you know, target my mom because she had an accent or, you know, my brother was having issues at school or even in the...down the block with another kid. I was the one that kinda came in very fiercely [laughs] and said don't pick on her or don't, you know, don't bother my brother, or try to come in and kinda fix it. So, I feel like just being the eldest, being kind of the--they used to call it like parentified child, I don't know what you call it--but I was my family's advocate. I mean, they really taught me how to be of service to others in so many ways, and that, to me, drove my activism today.

PB: You really know how to get stuff done.

RT: Yeah. No, I fix things--to this day, I'm the one they call. [laughs]

PB: That's such an honor.

RT: Yeah.

PB: I mean, you too.

RT: Well, when I was younger every time my mom came home with another baby I'd cry, but I didn't realize it...it was gonna shape the person that I am today in such a profound way.

[0:03:56]

PB: Could you speak a little bit more about how your identity as a Muslim woman, as a child of immigrant parents, and your dad being an auto worker, how that...those identities influenced your political development?

RT: Yeah. I mean, for me, I knew I was Muslim, but I was more Palestinian growing up because my parents were so proud of being Palestinian, and my dad, who only had a fourth-grade education, when he was about nine or ten, he moved from Jerusalem to Nicaragua. And then, from there he came to the United States at the age of 19. My mom only had eighth-grade education, grew up on a farm in the West Bank, near Ramallah. Both of which, you know, saw first-hand what dehumanization felt like, the fact that they didn't feel any, you know, sort of equality under the state of Israel, and so much of that seeped into their kind of view of the world and, you know, sense of what justice should be like, and my dad, who is part of the UAW [United Automobile Workers], who was, you know, first job he ever really had that came with like a paycheck and health insurance and everything was him working at the Ford plant in Flat Rock [Michigan]. And growing up, I knew very much first thing was that I was Palestinian, and not to forget that because my mom's passport when she came to this country, it didn't say she was born in Palestine because Palestine didn't exist at that ti--moment. It said Jordan. And, you know, this kind of like, nope. That you're not that person, this is not who you are, you know, you're--and my mom's...my mom had never been to Jordan before. And so a lot of people don't realize the human impact of the kind of dehumanization that happens when you strip people of their land, of their being, of who they are. And my parents, so much of the way they reacted to things, injustices and so forth, I think was through that lens of being Palestinian.

So for me, being Palestinian, I--it resonated in different movement tables. And some of the tables, when people talked about segregation, I was like, oh I'm...this is what happened to my uncle. When they talk about the lack of resources and those kinds of issues, again, talking to my parents and my father who grew up in such really concentrated poverty, all of that is so interconnected with my Palestinian immigrant parents. So it shaped, you know, my lens in so many ways. But I did grow up in the most beautiful, blackest city in the...in the country and combine that, I always say, people, you combine that, those Palestinian roots with growing up in Detroit, you...you have a warrior [laughs] by the time you're done.

[0:06:41]

PB: Speaking of that, what connections do you see between ongoing struggles for human rights and self-determination between Detroit and Palestine?

RT: I always tell people, when you see Gaza...I see it in what's happening in Yemen. I see it in what's happening at our borders. I...so much...the kind of push for civil rights, the push against mass incarceration and towards equity in education, all of those movement works is somehow always tied in with the experiences of my grandparents and my mom and my dad. And it just makes it stronger for me, it makes it more real for me. But yeah, I always tell people, I don't care if it's access to clean water in Gaza or here in Detroit, right now, at this very moment, fighting for clean water.

[0:07:35]

PB: So, could you tell us about how you made the decision to first run for state office?

RT: I don't know, I...well, I do know. So [laughs], I...I was doing work at ACCESS [Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services], which is the largest Arab-American human services agency, and I was doing this diversity training, trying to move people on their issue around immigration reform. So at that time, Senator Ted Kennedy and Senator [John] McCain had introduced comprehensive immigration reform. I mean, it was the most, I think, transformative reform to our immigration laws, which are completely broken, completely deteriorated. And I was organizing marches from southwest Detroit at the Clark Park to the federal building. I was doing Know Your Rights training in the basements of like Holy Redeemer Church and other communities and...and teaching folks of, you know, we're in a northern border here. Like, I know it's not the southern border but we are a northern border. And yes, ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] agents are patrolling our neighborhoods. We've, you know, actually got documentation of checkpoints--which, again, triggers my Palestinian ancestry, my mom having to go through checkpoints when I'm with her in Palestine.

All of that led me to law--like pushing and getting really upset on this issue around Dreamers and I had graduated... when I graduated from Southwestern High School, there was a handful of my classmates that had not known that they were undocumented until grad--until like eleventh grade, when they were starting to apply. One friend of mine, her parents actually sat her down and said, you know, like, "You're not documented here." She's like, "What are you talking about?" And she's like...they told her for the first time, "Yeah, you...you can't really apply to higher edu--because you're not really...have any documentation, right?" And it was the first time this kind of helplessness--and she was like smarter than me. She was at the top of the ten...I mean, she was, you know, she was gonna go on and it was so... like, she felt like she had this huge future, and she started having suicidal thoughts. It was...it was so awful.

And so I wanted, when I heard that a state representative was doing a--we call it in-state tuition. And I said, you know, who is it? And they said the guy's name, and I'd never heard of him, and it was Steve Tobocman. At first I was like, Tobocman, you know? That's not even...is that somebody from the neighborhood? [laughs] I never heard of that name before. Couldn't even pronounce it. And I found out it was this, like, young Jewish boy from, like, Farmington Hills [Michigan] who had moved into southwest Detroit like four years prior to, was doing community development, genius, so, you know, thoughtful in his thinking, introduced it. And so I found out, oh, that's my state rep, okay. And so we...we did this big lobby day in Lansing, and that developed the relationship. I hired with him, and I did a diversity training and... So, I decided to go work for him. I...I remember him saying, "So, you want to come work for me?" And I was like, "No, I'm not gonna...I don't...I don't want...that's not my thing." And he's like, "Well, I'll teach you how to kill a bill." And at that time, I was tracking all the anti-immigrant bills, and it was up to like 70 or so. English-only checkbox on your driver's license if you...if you weren't born here. Like, things like that, people don't realize. It was up to like 82 by the time I came to work for him.

And so, I said, this is great. For two years, I'll come and work for him. But the point is, he, two months in, he's like, "What are you gonna do when I'm done? I'm term-limited out." I said, "I don't know. I'm gonna go back to the nonprofit sector." And I remember him specific saying, "You should run for my seat." [laughs] And I,

like, laughed, and I said, "I'm not gonna sell out." And he's like, "You're calling me a sellout?" I said, "No, Steve, you're not a sell-out." And I said I just felt like I had to change who I was or...because there is this persona or whatever of, you know, I've always been this activist, like, how can I be on the inside? I'm here just to learn a skill so I can go back out, and when I'm in the church basements, I want to do Know Your Rights, and then I'm gonna teach 'em how to kill a bill, make sure it dies in committee and it never sees the day of light. And I was very passionate about that and that was my mission.

But ten days before the filing deadline, I felt this, like...I felt, like, needed, but it took seven different people to convince me to run. And it was Shelli Weisberg from ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] Michigan who...we were at this thing in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and she said, "You know, people like us don't run for office, and that's the problem. Imagine you weren't in the room, Rashida, when they talked about driver's licenses." She had known--found out that I was in the room when we were talking about driver's licenses for immigrants. And I'm a staffer and you're not supposed to speak up, but I got up and spoke up to, like, current state...and I have never been in the caucus room, and I said, "No!" And these were Democrats saying things that were factually incorrect, that were based...that were very racialized. And I couldn't not speak up, so I got up and spoke up. I was so afraid, you know, my boss Steve [Tobocman] was gonna get, like, upset, and... But I remember speaking up, and it, it got to the point where I think everybody voted for it--except for Steve because we believed everyone should get access to a driver's license, and this specifically said that if you had, like, an application in or anything like that, then...and it brought in the...it brought in the net (??), and it was a genius idea. It was...I love it because people don't understand immigration law.

So ten days before the filing deadline, my brother and I went together, and I filed to run for state house here in Michigan. I threw up. I'll tell you I did. I was so scared. I've never done anything like that. I've always been a behind-the-scenes person. But when Shelli [Weisberg] said that to me, when she said--you know, she had run for office and she's this amazing, beautiful, bold, radical, like, activist herself--that I felt like, she's right. I...I'm needed in there. Let me just get in there. Let me...let me change people's lives for the better. But it...I...I got these small little cards--and I paid for them myself--that said--I didn't have any money at that time, didn't know how to raise money.

I remember, like, Steve [Tobocman]'s like, "What did you do?" I was like, "Well, I put my own money in and I got these small cards that say, 'I'm gonna come to your neighborhood.'" And, yeah. I went door-to-door. I walked...I thought I knew southwest Detroit, but when you walk it, it's a completely--it's such a different view. Like, I saw poverty differently after that. I saw, like, environmental injustices differently, everything. I experienced something that was transformative for me, and it made me a better advocate. But yeah--you know, twenty pounds lighter, too. Just for all the young women, I always tell young women, oh yeah, you campaign, and if you do it right, it's also a great way to get even healthier [laughs] than you might have been before. But yeah, I...I ran, and I didn't...it was still hard the first six months, but it didn't change who I was, and I still got things done.

[0:14:37]

PB: So, you mentioned that one of the intentions you had in running was to develop skills to then bring back into the community.

RT: Yeah.

PB: What were some of those skill sets that you developed in your time in the state house?

RT: So, one of the things I learned a lot is how we just wait for things to come to the floor. And I'm like, nah, there's all these things you can do while it's still in committee. And, you know, one of the things I taught my residents is the power of the letterhead and the power to convene. So, a lot of us were so focused on getting legislation passed that I...I was able to show that if I got the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency]... I did this convening on environmental justice reform and literally brought the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] Region 5 folks that cover Michigan, I got the folks that were at the local level, and got all these community groups in a room, and said we have an injustice issue with air quality here. It's getting really bad, one in five children have asthma. We have the

highest asthma hospitalization rate in one of our zip codes. And the power to convene brought light to the issue, and it pushed back against some of the injustices.

But I also taught a lot of my residents, like, about the power of the letterhead, and I was able to put things on my letterhead that actually changed people's lives today versus having to wait for a bill to pass. And I also tell the story about, you know, I did it the right way, what you call the traditional way, when petroleum coke got found on the riverfront and it was, you know, literally dumped there on, you know, this billionaire's [Manuel "Matty" Moroun?] property, who said, "I didn't know it was there!"--which is bullshit. But, you know, the...the petroleum coke shows up on the riverfront. We're talking about forty feet high, tons, and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality tells me it's not toxic. Now, this is before Flint. And I was like, how is it not toxic? It's a by-product of tar sands from Canada that was pumped in to the Marathon oil petroleum refinery right in our backyard in southwest Detroit, and they have this coker and they produce these pebbles, and the...it was a black cloud of dust that was blowing everywhere throughout the community. And when they told me it wasn't toxic, I just didn't believe it.

And it was one person in our community said, "I wish we could get it tested." And I was like, "Well, why not? I can get samples." So, even as a sitting state representative, I went through the so-called process, and it didn't work. So I went ahead and got...jumped over, you know, piles of debris and tracks and stuff and got on the property and...and was able to get Ziploc bags and get it tested myself, and I released the results which said carcinogenic [sic] and all this. That led...I tell my residents all the time, like, you have to understand, like, it can't be just the same old process. We can get justice by doing things like this. But releasing that and showing the test results made the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality change their position and saying it's not toxic if it's contained. And they found...they tested homes that were nearby, found petroleum coke on people's dish sponge, on their window sill. People were really distraught, but that led to elevating the issue and finally getting the petroleum coke removed from the riverfront.

PB: So, I know you're also really actively involved again--in...in struggles against what I've heard you describe as corporate bullies...

RT: Yeah.

PB: ...in...in southwest Detroit and the city in general. Can you talk a little bit about how, like, folks like Matty Moroun and other corporate interests have impacted your communities directly and some of the work that you've done in fighting against that kind of displacement?

RT: Yeah. I mean, you know, one of the things about corporate polluters, especially in southwest Detroit I saw specifically, is this kind of lawlessness, this I'm gonna close my...I'm gonna close the city streets. I'm gonna buy my way through the legislature. Me and my--me and the mayor are friends, so I can put up a fence and take a public park, no big deal. Oh, Jefferson? Yeah, that's an important street, but I'm gonna block it off and put a fence there. All based on these, you know, relationships. And maybe based on, you know, this upgraded version of pay-to-play or this sense that, you know, the people on the ground, the people that actually elected those that are making decisions, are not as valued equally to somebody that has maybe a larger balance in their saving--safe dep--you know, savings account. There was this sentiment--even from my, you know, pastors, some of my faith leaders, really thought he could just get away with it because he's a billionaire, because this is just how it's always been. And what I learned early on is that people felt very defeated, demoralized. People felt like we couldn't do anything.

And I so much want to teach them that, no, like, I work for you, like, let's use my office to elevate the issue. So we started... We have a Right to Breathe campaign out of my office, and we did these postcards that had real people's images, like families within the district, and on the back, it said, we deserve a cumulative impact analysis. We deserve environmental impact study, which is a much more aggressive study into people's public health and the...and the impact on communities, especially communities of color. And we shifted this, you know,

conversation that everything has to be around bills and committee and we couldn't get there because he...he bought his way through that. He bought their silence. That we were able to show, no, the inside-outside game, that is possible. And it can free us from all of the misinformation, free us from this kind of--'cause there was such an injustice that he was...his narrative was being played over and over again, and people believed it. They believed that, oh, he couldn't be building this without a permit. No, he is! Oh no, there's no way he knocked down six homes without permits. No, he did! Oh, there's no way that he, you know, could go to jail because...guess what? After over a year, going to court, filing to be held in contempt, a billionaire, Matty Moroun, was put in handcuffs and dragged into jail. For one day, yes, but my God, did it liberate my community in understanding that people power is so much stronger, that if we organize ourselves, if we really center around what's right and what's just, we can win.

[0:21:12]

PB: That inside-out game you described, how can that be effective--like, how does that work? Like, what, how can it be most effective?

RT: Well, I can know...And now I'm a member of Congress, and one of the things we do is our...our work group. Our legislative work group sessions are here, in the district. I'll tell you a great story. So, a colleague of mine in the Senate has a different poli--it's a kind of a tax credit for what they call middle-class families. I...I don't like saying middle-class because my folks that are in middle-class don't feel like they're in middle-class anymore. They feel like they're in lower-income class. I mean, working class, whatever it is. I feel like it leaves so many of us out. But, you know, well-intended, moved forward, and said, "I'm gonna do this tax credit for the middle class." Well, I had a round table of mothers and families, round table in the district. And everyone in the table said, "Well, that's not fair. What if I'm a caretaker? What if I'm a student? I'm not gonna be able to qualify." And we said, "Well, then you don't have to have income." And we changed the concept and now we introduced the Boost Act. And the Boost Act was from the outside game. These are groups that literally are on the front line, from labor to groups that are trying to combat poverty, trying to uplift mothers in the workplace, all of those folks said we need it to...to basically apply to anybody that makes less than

100,000 dollars. And that's exactly what happened, and...and the Boost Act got overwhelming support from my colleagues.

There has been a lot of incredible attention to this idea of, oh, well, how are you gonna pay for it? And I said, we're gonna repeal the Trump GOP [Grand Old Party] tax plan that gave to the rich, gave to corporations, and didn't help our people. I mean, what a...what an amazing idea to say our money, the money that the people put forward, let's put it back into the people's hands. And...and all the folks that work on economics in our country say when I put money back into the pockets of ordinary Americans, it goes right back. It fuels right into the local economy. It's a win-win. We see what happened with the Earned Income Tax Credit. This is working, you know, class residents that are, you know, literally making, you know, low-end, working in low-end wage, at low-end wages, earning low-end wages. And all of them were able to... They wait until that end of the year when they go file their tax and then they get this big tax break. They...they spend it on fixing their cars and...and, you know, paying the bills that they have, or all those things. This is the same kind of concept. And I can tell you, it is really...It's gonna lift millions, I think three million children out of poverty.

And it all happened because of staying rooted in the community because [Washington] D.C. will swallow you up. Lansing [Michigan] will swallow you up. Sometimes being in City Hall for long periods of time without going in the block-club meetings and really listening to people will swallow you up. And when it does, it's not even just about, like, getting swallowed into this, like, bubble that exists there, but it gets you so disconnected about what's happening on the ground. My colleague Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley says so beautifully, she says, "Those closest to the pain need to have the power," and I just cannot reiterate that importance. And so, this inside-outside game is about making sure that people really feel like they're seen and heard and that they have a seat at the table, and the only way you do it is that you are the ones...I always think of myself, like, what does my residents think about that? Like, I literally check in with community members without titles. Not the ones who run organiz--but the community members without titles, the ones on the ground will tell me, "No, you're right. Facial recognition is crazy, like, I don't want it. No, I want a moratorium!" Like, where others were like, "Oh, well maybe we can fix it..." I said, I'm not here to help corporations who want to sell surveillance mechanisms and schemes to cities like ours and, you know, fix their systems so that they can...No! I

don't want to criminalize communities. I want to talk about restorative justice. I want to talk about community policing, real ways that make us feel safe.

Those are the things that I think happen because you stay rooted and you really listen. It's those everyday stories, honestly, that fuels me, remind me of why I do the things that I do. I, you know, will never forget the woman who came in that couldn't pay her DTE [Detroit Edison Energy] bill. She was shaking and saying to me, you know, "Do I spend this hundred dollars to get my lights back on, or can I help my daughter, not take away the fact that she...she has her homecoming dance this weekend?" And I said, "Well, we can do both, what do you need?" And getting her a dress for her daughter, getting the community involved. Knowing that, you know, poverty is real and it, like, it impacts people's daily lives. No matter how much folks in Washington, D.C. think they know best. Most of them are income bracket, they're millionaires. They're in an income bracket that is so disconnected from what the American struggle is right now in all communities. I don't care if it's Republican or Democratic districts, Americans are hurting right now. And if we're not staying connected and rooted in the community and really listening, we're never gonna be able to change it for the better.

[0:26:25]

PB: On that note, so, when you're having these discussions in community, a lot of times a lot of these issues can feel so localized and like, impacting just at the ground level. How do you draw those connections between what's happening on...in this particular block or in this neighborhood or in this city to up the ladder, to like the national context?

RT: Yeah, I, you know... For me, it's staying connected to the district. So, I introduced the Boost Act. So many came up to me and said, you know, "I know you're...you have the third-poorest congressional district," but they're like, "This would help my families," so just connecting with people there. But the best ver--best one I can tell you, how I saw it kind of like a symphony, like come together was when I, you know, came forward and said to the chair of Financial Services, Chairwoman Maxine Waters, and others, like, these non-driving factors are hurting, they're discrimination in disguise, and the car insurance industry is

out of control in Michigan. We pay the highest car insurance in the nation. When I introduced a bill that said you can't use credit scores, I showed my colleagues how somebody with driving under the influence violation with okay credit score was paying 300 percent less than someone that had great driving history and record, safe driver, with an okay, you know, a decent credit score. The unfairness of it...and it always landed in communities of color. It always landed in working-class, white communities too. I mean, you, all of those communities were suffering because of these non-driving factors. I couldn't believe how many said, "That's an issue in my state. That's an issue in my state," but it hasn't been elevated to becoming this national movement. And now, this is the second bill that myself and Congresswoman [Bonnie] Watson-Coleman in New Jersey, we introduced one that said no non-driving factors, including marital status, education levels--I mean, I cannot believe the auto insurance industry is using these factors. I know for a fact homeowners' insurance is using these factors. There's a lot of other corporations that are using these non...these kind of discriminatory practices, and these ways of looking at the individual that is leading towards disparate impact of...of people of color and low-income families.

[0:28:50]

PB: This is also making me think about how water shutoffs, tax foreclosures, school closures are disproportionately impacting residents, particularly African-American residents, in Detroit. And this is a national issue, where we look at Newark, New Jersey having a lot of similar issues.

RT: Mmhmm.

PB: What would it take, in a...from...in the political sector, legislative sector to address these issues in a substantive way on a national level?

RT: I mean, you address the issue of water crisis and the issue around even just putting money towards infrastructure things and having it be driven by the public instead of for-profit industry and corporations is... We have to realize that's exactly what's happening. I mean, there's a real corporate assault on our family,

on our country right now that is driven by profits over people. And when we really realize that and we allow people that are running for office and others to say, if you agree with that, then let's walk away and not accept, you know, the influence of corporations and corporation dollars into campaigns. That we have to end Citizens United, we have to push back against that. I think also, what's really critically important is, you know, a Black pastor in my district said, "You know, Rashida, we're not a country that's divided. We're just disconnected." And, you know, Pastor [Steve] Bland is right. Not only what's going on about hate agenda that's being pushed out right now from the White House, but also on these issues.

There's so much connectivity in these movement work around those that are working for climate justice, that those that are trying to prevent, you know, trying to push back against poverty, those that are trying to unionize certain sectors of the industry right now. All of those folks need to come together and really try to connect these movements because it is us versus them and 'them' is the one percent. 'Them' is the corporations, those that have been able to infiltrate our democracy, taint it to the point where they don't want to talk about the fact that, yeah, more and more people are being discriminated against, more and more people are suffering because we can't get them clean water, we can't get them access to real, you know, jobs with real living wages. And...and I think when that happens, this movement will get stronger and we will be able to push back.

[0:31:10]

PB: We saw a lot of that, like, with Detroit being ground zero during emergency management and bankruptcy.

RT: Yeah.

PB: Could you talk a little bit about how your communities were impacted by that period and your analysis why Detroit had emergency management imposed upon it?

RT: Yeah. I mean, when you think about voter suppression, a lot of people think about the day of. They think about the time leading up to the moment that you get to vote. You know, from ID laws, all of those things, not being on the voter list when you show up to go to vote. Yeah, those are, that's voter suppression. But I want people to think also after you vote, the people that you voted in to make decisions. You know, that's your self-determination, right? That's your...that's your way of having accountability, of making sure democracy is about the people.

What happened is voter suppression, where you had a governor, a Republican-led legislature decide that emergency management process needs to be put in place to help those that are fiscally-challenged communities and literally appoints somebody that takes a class--I think it's like a course or something--and appoints this person who is not accountable to the people, is not elected, and wipes out all of the power of the local city council, of the mayors, of anybody on the local level that's elected to make decisions. That is voter suppression. You just took my right to vote. You impacted my right to vote for...for those folks that will make decisions and be public and transparent. You know, what happened in Flint, in the crisis in Flint was all driven by corporate greed and voter suppression that started with the emergency manager. The emergency manager made the decision that was literally decided by the governor--because that person reports to the governor--to poison--to be okay with poisoning children in Flint and the families, and...and to hide it afterwards, which we can never, ever make it better at this point for the children that have been exposed to it. They're forever...it's gonna be in their blood, forever will they be impacted. People have died because of it.

And so, I want folks when they think about voter suppression not to think of the day of, but also know that there are voter suppression that's happening after you elect, after you vote those in power, that there is that, that that's happening. I think very much, yeah, in our case in Michigan it's emergency manager. And if you look at even the fact that Detroit filed bankruptcy and all those things, if you look at the...the...the history of how it got let up, it was the continued divestment. I mean, I heard it from my colleagues. They say, "Oh, I don't... We're tired. We're tired of throwing money"--'cause it's throwing money when you give it to Detroit. I've had people say that to me. It's like, what are you talking about? That's the largest populated city in our state. I think it's a... I said at that time, it was like 600, 700--650,000 people live in the city of Detroit. She takes all the sick, the weak, the poor, the disenfranchised. It's expensive to take care of those Michiganders. The

next other most populated is Grand Rapids at 200,000. That's the difference, right? This is a major city with the majority, with a majority-populated city that's African American. You don't want to invest in the school system? You don't want to look at, oh, well, we're short 300 million dollars for revenue sharing. That's city services, that can help pay the bills. They don't think of it that way because their lens, all of it, is so racial. It's all racialized, and...and it's very much deep-rooted into the history of our state in that Detroit has always been left behind.

It's always the disinvestment that continues to happen, not only at the city level but also in our school system. I see it now, where everyone is like, "This is great. We're gonna give a tax give-away to the Ilitches, to billionaires. We're gonna give them 30 years of tax break." But if I came to them and said, can we do the same thing for our school system? Our school system. Can we say, hey, from right here to now, we want to go ahead and give them an exemption on their water bills, we're gonna give 'em an exemption on... 'cause right now that's exactly... Some of them are literally under-water because they can't afford the utility, they can't afford those...those...those essentials to keeping the lights on. That conversation, that reality is happening every single day not only on the national level but here, always.

Yeah, everybody keeps saying Detroit's comi--I say, come back from where? Where's Detroit coming back from? Because I--what I see is poverty increasing. I notice that all of a sudden, some of my council members when Amazon--it took Amazon to say, well, we're not gonna come here, which I don't mind. But Amazon said, oh, we're not gonna come here. Not only because they didn't--There's no transit system. Because Detroit hasn't got a handle on poverty, they said. And all of a sudden, people were like [gasps] awakened. It took a corporation, not the actual people, to tell you they can't afford their water bill? They can't afford to keep their lights on? They can't afford transportation to get to work? They've been saying it for years to y'all, but you're waiting until corporate interest groups come in to tell you exactly what the people have been telling you. All of that is so seeped into why bankruptcy even had to happen and why, you know, that's where they led to. And...and guess who paid for it? Not Detroit Art--which I love the DIA [Detroit Institute of Arts]. I was there. They sacrificed art. And the only way we were able to get them to at least save some of the pension, you know some of the retirees' pension, was to save the art. I lived it. I was there. I just kept looking at my colleagues like, is this really happening? Are we, is the...is the art in the DIA

[Detroit Institute of Arts], because it's run by some of the handful of very wealthy Michigan families and foundations, that we're...we're gonna go ahead and now do right by the people because the one percent said you need to? I, it--it didn't make any sense.

[0:37:41. Jump cut.]

PB: What advice would you give to young organizers and activists today for working with elected officials to advance racial equity, human rights, self-determination? And then the second one is, what's your vision for the future of Detroit that guides your work?

RT: [Inaudible] So, I think for young people that are in the movement work right now, that--to recognize this is a new era of the civil rights movement, a new era of the social justice movement. And, you know, I heard this yesterday, but, you know, if you're scared of doing something, if it's something that puts fear into you, then it must be the right thing. So, don't let fear drive some of the actions that you take. As long as it's peaceful, as long as it's based in love and respect for justice, then you're doing the right thing. I think for the future, I want to see this generation, you know, more people like myself running for office and getting on the inside. Because I can tell you, it was Congressman John Dingell that said Congress used to be the balance of power. Congress used to be the place where the working-class used to be the members of Congress, where it was--you went from the union hall or the...the plant to Congress. You got there, and you balanced. You're the one that was the safeguard, the wall between the one percent and the working class, the corporate assault that we see now. That was the amazing balance of power that happened between the rich and the majority of the American people. You don't have that anymore because the majority of my colleagues are millionaires. The majority of my colleagues were saying to federal workers, "Why are you in the food bank line? I don't get it. Why can't you go get a loan?" They didn't understand what the shut-down of the government meant for real people that work every single day to keep our country moving forward. It is that disconnect that worries me the most, and I want the young people, and I want those that are doing this work to know that running for office doesn't mean you're a sell-out. Running for office is about justice, is about freedom, is about pushing against these kinds of assaults on real people.

[0:39:36. Jump cut]

About white supremacy and white nationalism in our country. I want people to think, when they think about Detroit, about what happened with emergency manager. Predominantly African-American cities were the ones who got emergency manager. I see the continued bail-out of some municipalities through their school-aid fund and through other things that happen. But if you look at just the move towards this idea around, like, they don't know enough. They don't...they don't know how to take care of themselves. Let me go ahead and put this person--it's usually done through the lens of, I think, this movement around communities of color shouldn't be able to self-determine, that they don't...they...they don't understand enough. They don't...they shouldn't be the ones in power. I think for me, that's how I felt when I saw it move through the legislature, and it continued always through the rhetoric of, God, when are y'all gonna understand over there?

Well, white supremacy and the way they make it through the system is through policy. I mean, even if you think about the current rhetoric coming out, people need to know, it's not just this rhetoric. It's actually seeping into policy making. And that's what you, when you look at, think about emergency manager and what happened and the fact that it targeted communities of color, predominantly Black cities in Michigan were directly impacted by it. That's what led to Flint and the poisoning of children, that led to the continued disenfranchisement right now in Detroit of infrastructure, and that the fact that we don't have clean water and kids in schools--the majority of my schools don't have fountains that will seep out clean water for my kids. All of that is so much inter-connected to this movement around white supremacy in our country that is seeping in through policy. And if you open the curtains, it's the same people. The same people that support this current president and his hate agenda, it's the same people that support this move around dismantling some of the protections on civil rights and civil liberties, protections for LGBTQ. If you open the curtain, it's the same people that are pushing emergency manager.

[0:41:38]

PB: And then the last one that I'll mention is your vision for the future of Detroit. So, I think another way...

RT: Yeah.

PB: ...we could frame this is like, if you're successful in what you do...

RT: Yeah.

PB: ...and if movement work is successful, what would that Detroit look like?

RT: I mean, I think if this incredible movement work that is always birthed in every corner of Detroit is successful, I see more people thriving and having acc--equal access to be able to thrive. But it wouldn't have any child that would go hungry, that a mother can take her child out and not worry about them getting asthma. That when I go into a school, it's beautiful. It's clean. It's healthy. It's safe. That's the kind of Detroit I want to see. If these movement work gets...leads to this kind of, I think, combatting kind of this, to me, is this form of oppression and form of injustices. You know, I'll see joy, joy in people's faces, pure joy. And it will be because they feel like they belong, they feel safe, they feel equal, they feel like their human dignity is intact.