

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

JoAnn Watson

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER

March 22, 2019

Detroit, Michigan

Narrator

JoAnn Watson was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan and grew up during the Civil Rights movement. JoAnn has been involved in the Detroit community and politics for decades and was mentored by Rosa Parks. Rev. Dr. Watson worked for Congressman John Conyers and was a member of Detroit City Council from 2003 to 2013. Additionally, she was active in the Detroit NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association]. She currently has her own radio show "Wake Up 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.

Abstract

JoAnn Watson discusses her family background, how she was introduced to the movement at a young age, the influence of the Black Power and Black Liberation movements on her, how she was mentored by Rosa Parks, Erma Henderson, and Coleman Young, and how she tries to pass on their lessons. Throughout, she tells many anecdotes of famous Detroiters and others that she met or heard stories about. She talks about her work as a staffer for John Conyers and her role in opposing the 1999 state takeover of Detroit Public Schools. A major topic is why she ran for Detroit City Council, her campaign, and what she did while on council, with a particular focus on the Detroit bankruptcy, emergency management, the Detroit Marshall Plan, and the water affordability plan. She also touches on emergency management as a way to take assets from the city, the foreclosure crisis, gentrification, and the importance of Black-owned businesses. She describes how she became a radio host and what the role of the media can be in movement work.

Keywords

Aretha Franklin; C. L. Franklin; C. T. Vivian; Coleman Young; Detroit bankruptcy ; Detroit City Council; Detroit Marshall Plan; Detroit, Michigan; Dorothy Irene Height; Education; Eleanor Roosevelt; Emergency management; Erma Henderson; Foreclosure crisis; Gentrification; Group on Advanced Leadership; Joe Louis; Journalism; Lila Cabbil; Malcolm X; Martha Reeves; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Mary McLeod Bethune; Nation of Islam; Paul Robeson; Privatization; Reparations Ray Jenkins; Rosa Parks; Shrine of the Black Madonna; Wake Up Detroit; Water affordability; Water shutoffs; We the People of Detroit

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Transcript of interview conducted March 22, 2019 with:

JoAnn Watson [JW]

Detroit, MI

By: Peter Blackmer [PB]

PB: Good morning, Ms. Watson.

JW: Good morning.

PB: Could you please--so we have it on film--tell us your name, your title or affiliations that you like, and where you live?

[0:00:00]

JW: My name is Reverend Dr. JoAnn Watson, sometimes called Professor Watson. I'm a professor at Wayne County Community College District. I'm also the Senior Pastor at West Side Unity Church. I'm a native of Detroit, Michigan, and I feel very blessed to be here. I am an activist. I'm a former City Council member. I retired after 10 years. I was the first woman executive of the Detroit NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. I've worked for the National-wide YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association] in addition to being a director of the local YWCA. For the national association, I was the Director of Racial Justice. I was connected with the National Anti-Klan Network and the Racial Justice Working Group of the National Council of Churches.

PB: That's a distinguished list. [laughs]

JW: Thank you.

PB: Thank you for coming and speaking with us.

JW: It's a privilege to be here.

PB: It's an honor to have you.

JW: I certainly think it an honor and a privilege to be a part of this project of the Damon J. Keith Center of Wayne State University. I know Judge Keith and honor him, and he was one I worked very closely with during my tenure with the NAACP.

PB: I'm sure you have some stories together. [laughs]

JW: I do.

[0:01:21]

PB: Before we get into more current issues and your visions on the state of the city, I would hope that you--I would ask you: could you please describe your neighborhood in the city when you were growing up for us?

JW: Well, I'm a real, true Detroiter because I was born in the East Side where my father's mother, my grandmother, had a home in what is now called Paradise Valley, the Paradise Valley District near Black Bottom, and she was the

quintessential grandmother who had big Sunday feasts and a lineup of cakes personally baked by her, and she was a wonderful, wonderful, grandmother, and the whole family on my father's side circulated around her home. My mother's father and mother were also here, my Big Mama and Big Daddy, and they lived a block away from the old Tiger Stadium. So, that side of the family was another family-filled fest with big Sunday dinners. So, we often had two Sunday dinners.

It was a wonderful, wonderful, nurturing, loving, environment. So, I'm very blessed to have had a wonderful father and mother, God rest their souls, who treated all 10 of their children like we were an only child. They lavished love, and I didn't find out that our family was low-income until I filled out the financial aid application to attend the University of Michigan and realized I qualified for everything as the oldest of 10. I thought we were...I thought we were middle class. We were not. We may have had a middle class lifestyle, but we did not have a middle class income.

I got introduced to the movement at an early age. My grandparents picked me up at 12 years old. They just stopped by the house unexpectedly and told me to hop in the car, and they drove to the Walk to Freedom led by Reverend Dr. C. L. [Clarence LaVaughn] Franklin where Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. first said, "I Have a Dream." It was one of the most eventful moments of my life. I'll never forget it.

[0:03:27]

PB: How... Could you just explain how that march, that atmosphere...

JW: It transformed me. I felt as if I were lifted up. First of all, the people, the sheer magnitude of the number of people that swelled Woodward Avenue--Woodward Avenue being the main street in Detroit. My grandfather, who worked for the auto industry and who was feeling a sense of pride about so many UAW [United Auto Workers] members being out there supporting the march. My grandmother was just crying. She was just crying about the sheer sight of so many people--Black and white, young and old--being in this march. It really took over Downtown Detroit

and Cobo. And then, of course, to hear the booming, thunderous ovation of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the crescendo of "I Have a Dream," it absolutely lifted me to a point that can't be described. It touched my soul, my heart. It connected me with the larger movement in a significant way.

So, at 12 years old, I absolutely felt thrust into the movement, and I never left it. I felt a connection, and while still in middle school, I read everything in the Black power and Black liberation movement. I followed resources in the community that were left and progressive, and because I went to Central High School, which was on Linwood--Linwood Avenue was the same avenue--in fact, it was right across the street from the Nation of Islam, the first mosque of the Honorable Elijah Mohammad. So, even though I was Methodist, we were impacted by the Nation of Islam. Down the street was the Shrine of the Black Madonna. I was impacted by the philosophy of the Shrine of the Black Madonna. Across the street from my high school was the Group on Advanced Leadership, which was the community organization that was put together by the close followers of Malcolm X., Dr. Imari Obadele, then called Richard Henry, and his brother Reverend Milton Henry--Gaidi Obadele was his African name--and that was directly across the street. The Group on Advanced Leadership was the organization that they founded with Malcolm X was across the street where I went to middle school and high school. So, the movement was actively fermenting in the neighborhood where I grew up.

So, I was born in the East Side, but I grew up on the West Side. So, the West Side, which is where Linwood Avenue is--and Linwood Avenue was also where Reverend Dr. C.L. Franklin's church is. In fact, there is Reverend Dr. C.L. Franklin Boulevard. And every time the street sign gets taken away, Aretha [Franklin] used to call me and say, "JoAnn, they took my Daddy's sign again. Better do something about it." I say, "Yes, Ma'am," [laughs] and I'd have Reverend Dr. C.L. Franklin's sign reinstalled on Linwood Avenue. So, it was a wonderful time to be alive and be connected. I declare, I had, from the Black Panther Party to the Republic of New Africa to the League of Revolutionary Workers, I had many, many tentacles of the movement that were connected in my life.

[0:07:00]

PB: That's an incredible hub. A wealth of knowledge, of power, in such a small, little, tight location. Do you see any--what kind of reverberations do you see from that era of the movement today, if any?

JW: I see reverberations everyday because many of the lessons taught by those who are now ancestors are still with me, and I'm able to share them with the other people who now call me Mama Watson. So, the people I called Mama--you know, the Honorable Coleman A. Young got my Father's Day gifts after my father passed away. The honorable Erma L. Henderson who was the--Mayor Young was like the father of Detroit. Erma Henderson was like the mother, the matriarch of Detroit, and she considered me a daughter. I planned her funeral. I loved her. We were very close. She poured lessons into those she mentored.

So, it is my privilege to have many, many mentees and to pour into them, and they come from all walks of life, all nationalities, and it's a delight to be called. And every now and then, I get a call from a University of Michigan student who said they looked up some history and say, "I see you were active with the Black Action Movement. Will you come and talk to us?" I always say yes. It's a reminder that you owe--I owe. When I got the call to be part of this interview, I said yes because I owe. Somebody blazed a path for me to come through. So, I didn't make it because I was that smart or that good. I was blessed.

[0:08:45]

PB: Do you have any particular stories that stand out in your mind about lessons that you passed on to younger generations and how they can manifest in the community?

JW: Yes, I believe that people should research, learn lessons, and I also believe that folks ought to pay dues. So, I honored and worked closely with Mother Rosa Parks, for example, who lived in Detroit more years than she lived in Montgomery, Alabama. She looked a lot like my father's mother, my grandmother. I just loved her for many reasons, but she was also sweet and just humble, very, very simple, unadorned. She was not pretentious at all, and when Mother Parks would share

with us the importance of doing your homework, she would--because she would--before she was involved in the Montgomery bus boycott, she was going house-to-house researching complaints filed by women in Alabama who had been raped while in jail and doing this, putting her own life at risk. It took her several times to register to vote in Alabama, to be listed on the voting rolls. At that time, showing up to register to vote, which she had to do many times before she was finally allowed to do so, was putting her life at risk. So, she had a quiet courage and strength, and she didn't have to wave a banner and a flag and say what she did. She just did it.

So, sometimes you just do what you need to do, not because anybody is going to write about or do something about it. I think one of the best things I ever did, for a city council member, for example, will never be acknowledged in the newspaper or on TV. It was a woman in her late seventies just showed up at my office having already been to the mayor's office and several other council offices to say that she'd gotten a notice that there was going to be a lien put on her house by the Water Department for--because they claimed she owed 27,000 dollars on a water bill. She said, "Ms. Watson, my house ain't worth 27,000 dollars. I live by myself, and nobody will listen to me. Nobody will help me." She had tears in her eyes, and she said, "They put a lien on my house. That's why I came down to City Hall today. Somebody's got to help me." There was something about that lady. She seemed small, but she had the strength of a giant.

I took an attorney from my office, and we walked to the Water Department, which was just a block and a half away, and we sweet-talked the Water Department employees into letting us access their computers. Guess what? There was human error. Not only did she not owe 27,000 dollars, they owed her 344 dollars. So, the fact that this little lady who decided by powers on high that she was not going to be beaten down by a lie that she owed 27,000 dollars--ha!--on a water bill, and some force that was alien to humanity decided to put a lien on her house for a bill that was not hers, that was not righteous. That's the kind of fight that people need to wage every day on behalf of those who feel as if they're not represented. So, I don't think there's any--and that kind of fortitude. Don't give up. Take it all the way to the end. It's a kind of lesson I learned from Mother Rosa Parks.

PB: Now, besides yourself of course, who else in the city can you see carrying that torch, carrying out the legacy of Mother Parks and other freedom fighters?

JW: Helen Moore, Queen Mother Helen Moore. The great Monica Lewis-Patrick. Elena Herrada. Debra Taylor. There are many, many people who usually don't get their names called, usually don't get recognition, but who are carrying the banner and absolutely owning the challenges that others face as their own challenge. Because it's not about us. If we don't help somebody every day, then we're not on our job.

[0:13:27]

PB: So, those challenges you speak of--and this is kind of a big question so take it where you want to--but for the record and for future generations to understand, what does racism look like in Detroit today?

JW: Well, gentrification is happening, and in such a widespread manner that it's outrageous. Detroit used to be the home of the largest Black homeowner base in the country and the home of the Black middle class because of organized labor, and organized labor didn't just happen. There was a fight for organized labor. The great Dave Moore--who was one of my mentors, a very close friend of the honorable Coleman Alexander Young, who was still dating in his nineties, God rest his soul--he was one of the co-founders of the UAW [United Auto Workers]. That...he was one who gave his life to stand up for the union, but also demanded that the union not be racist, that it provide opportunities for people at all levels. General Baker was a great revolutionary, a League of Revolutionary [Black] Workers, the Dodge workers. He was courageous and one who sometimes would step out there and look behind all the folks who said they would be following him and were not. But, he never stopped. He never stopped. He was fearless.

Detroit has been filled with fearless activists, like Reparations Ray Jenkins, who was one of my mentors. Reparations Ray Jenkins, he sent me to the United

Nations World Conference Against Racism in 2001--this was before I was on city council--to address the fact that the transatlantic slave trade was a crime against humanity and should always have been so. So, I connected with thousands who were at that United Nations World Conference Against Racism. I had a chance to be in sessions with Nelson Mandela and Winnie Mandela, some of the greatest revolutionaries in the world--the world stage--were there. United States had a low-level delegation and had the nerve to walk out of the United Nations World Conference Against Racism. How do you walk out? The Congressional Black Caucus was there, praise God. Queen Mother Dr. Dorothy Irene Height, who was a great leader of the National Council of Negro Women, who was also one of my mentors, and she was personally mentored by Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune.

So, when Dr. Height hosted Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune at the Harlem YWCA in New York City [New York] and the First Lady of the United States Eleanor Roosevelt--she told me that story a hundred times. Eleanor Roosevelt drove herself to that meeting at the Harlem YWCA, and she said Dr. Mary McCleod Bethune had her hopping all day hosting and putting together human rights charters for the United Nations, that all the women and Dr. Bethune and Eleanor Roosevelt were working as peers, not as a "big I and little you," and she said that was instructive to her, the kind of respect that Dr. Mary McCleod Bethune--who also founded Bethune-Cookman College in addition to the National Council of Negro Women.

So, that sense of purpose and mission Dr. Height brought with her to the YWCA USA [United States of America]. So when she recruited me to take her position as the Director of Racial Justice at the YWCA USA, there was a mission to thrust our collective power to eliminate racism wherever it exists by any means necessary--that's all by Malcolm X. So, Dr. Dorothy Irene Height was always wearing a church hat and gloves and just a perfect, perfect picture of someone who was just a great dignified stateswoman. She was also revolutionary because she was the one who really altered that, to thrust our collective power toward the elimination of racism wherever it exists and by any means necessary. That is very off-the-beaten-path mission for an organization like the Young Women's Christian Association. So, all of that helped to provide an underpinning for my work at the NAACP in Detroit and my work certainly as a city council member. As a city council member, I never felt as if I was going to sit back and see how things were going. I jumped in. I was able to write thousands and thousands of laws because of my previous work with Congress and with civil rights and human rights.

Reverend Dr. C. T. [Cordy Tindell] Vivian mentored me as--he was a founder of the National Anti-Klan Network, and we organized to address hate crimes that were happening on college campuses while I was still working with the national YWCA of USA. There was a moment in that, as we worked to combat hate crimes on college campuses, when we convened in a huge conference in Phoenix, Arizona, and it was kind of a happy moment because I was able to pull people--Irene Natividad, who was representing the Asian and Pacific Islanders, and I had Dr. Dorothy Irene Height speaking for Black women. I had Wilma Mankiller, who was the only woman chief of the Cherokee nation. So, we had every group represented by a national leader of significance.

Just before that major conference in 1990, we got a call. I had never gotten a call from the U.S. State Department in my life, and they said that, under surveillance, they had picked up some attacks that were going to be on this conference in Phoenix, Arizona, and we might want to cancel the conference. So, I...I'm the mother of four children who were going with me on that trip, and I begin thinking about all these college students I had coming into Phoenix and all these speakers and felt a level of responsibility for their safety. So, I talked to Reverend Dr. C.T. Vivian, who was a lieutenant with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I said, "You know, the state department has kind of got my heart in a flux because they said we should cancel this conference because threats have come from the identity movement and hate groups." Reverend Dr. C.T. Vivian didn't even take a breath. "No! No! That's what we're here for! That's what we're here for! No, we're not cancelling. We're going to go forward. Let them come! Let them come!" I thought, "Oh, okay. [laughs] You're my elder." He's still my elder, 94 years old now.

We had the conference. There were no attacks, no threats or--It was a lesson. Every now and then, you just move forward with faith and courage and leadership. So, that lesson has helped to guide me as I continue with my work trying my best to make a difference in the lives of people, whether I'm a legislator elected, whether I'm a person working in the faith movement, whether I'm marching at the African American Museum [Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History] to tell them they should not be exhibiting a Thomas Jefferson helping somebody statue. He was an enslaver, and he was a pedophile, and Sally Hemings wasn't his mistress. She was his property. So, how dare you write all men

are created equal, and you own 600 Africans who are enslaved. Now, that dog don't hunt. So, I'm still active.

[0:21:13]

PB: I know you are. I saw you on the video footage from Detroit IPTV out front of the Wright.

JW: And, I'm a member of the Wright Museum. I knew Dr. Charles H. Wright. He was another mentor. He was a great living legend who was a great historian on Paul Robeson. He used to talk to me about how Paul Robeson could come to Detroit when he was not welcome anywhere else in this country after he became persona non grata for speaking out against United States racism. But, he would come to Detroit with Reverend Charles Hill, who then was an early president of the Detroit NAACP and also a senior pastor of Hartford Baptist Church, and it would be standing room only, standing room only, the audience to receive Paul Robeson. Coleman A. Young was one of his bodyguards long before he became mayor and Dave Moore, who was that co-founder of the UAW, were the bodyguards for Paul Robeson. And, Mother Erma Henderson who, long before she became city council president and a matriarch of the City of Detroit, she was assigned to cook Paul Robeson's meals. She told me she would put a whole beef brisket in the oven. He'd eat the whole brisket. [laughs] It would take several hours, but she would invite--while he waited because briskets take a while--so while he waited for the brisket to finish cooking after he had done a big speech at the Hartford Baptist Church, she would invite neighborhood children just to sit at his feet and have him talk about anything he wanted to talk about to make sure that young people in Detroit had access to this greatness of the brilliant legendary Paul Robeson.

One of the things Mother Henderson, the Honorable Erma Henderson, and the Honorable Coleman A. Young always talked about to me was their great, great pride in Joe Louis. They loved Joe Louis, and he gave them a sense of pride and connection and race pride that stayed with them for all of their lives. So even though I never saw Joe Louis, I felt his impact on the people here because of his part of the lore of Detroit.

There's something special about Detroit and the fermenta[tion]--even the Motown industry. I feel very blessed to be connected with the Martha Reeves of the Vandellas. She's my good friend. In fact, she was at my church on Sunday singing. I was told by Aretha that Berry Gordy would often bring some of the new musical pieces being developed by his artists to her home because he was so close to her father, Reverend Dr. C.L. Franklin. She often heard the Motown songs on the way to becoming before they were released because of the connection of those two great men right here in Detroit. So, even though she was never a Motown artist, she was connected because Smokey Robinson was her brother Cecil [Franklin]'s best friend, and he was always at their house. It was just an extended family kind of feeling to grow up here and have all these influences and all of them are connected. When I go to reparations conferences, I would always tell Aretha why. "I won't see you this weekend because I've got to go off to the meeting of the Nation Coalition of Blacks for Reparations of America." "JoAnn, tell them to send me a check!" That was her frequent refrain when I told her I'm going to a reparations meeting.

[0:24:40]

PB: Those networks are incredible. I think for those of us that weren't there to hear about the different people within your orbit is so illuminating, and I want to ask you about--speaking of that--your career or your background in politics before you got on the council. But before I get there, you mentioned being a mother of four.

JW: Yes.

PB: So, I think it's really important that we know, from your perspective, what it's like being a mother to four children while being active in the movement, while heading up national organizations?

JW: It's been a blessing. I love being--and first of all, I never see being a mother of four being a big deal because as the eldest of 10, my parents did everything with their children and made us feel completely loved and nurtured and protected, and I'm grateful that all 10 children had a chance to go to college. Everybody didn't finish, but the fact that all 10 went through a father who--and a mother--and my mother ended up graduating from the University of Michigan after having 10 children and becoming a reverend, a minister in the Methodist church. My father drove a taxi all night and work--drove a DP--a Department of Public Works truck all day to take care of his 10 children, picking up the trash in the City of Detroit, and he did it with honor and dignity. He never missed a day of work, never took a day off. I'm very pleased to have adopted his work ethic. When I was on City Council, I never took a sick day, but the Lord has blessed me with good health. I just feel very blessed to have had mentorship and also to be a mentor to those who were following me and those working around me.

As a city council member, I felt very strongly that you have to hit the ground running and not go along and get along. So, I came on, introduced the legislation to put young people to work, and had a city council member take me aside my first month on council, and she said, "Look at you with 20 task forces. The rest of us have three. Are you trying to show us up? What are you doing, doing all this work?" And, "We don't do this kind of stuff here." I said, "Thank you for your input." I just thanked her kindly and went on back to my seat, kept on working. [laughs] One of the council members told me, he said, "I voted for that summer job for youths just to get you to stop talking about it. Every day, every day you say we've got to put our children in there." I said, "That's what we're here for. If we don't make it a better Detroit for the young people, why are we here?" And, there's enough money floating around in these departments. If we all hire 10 people of our own in our own offices, think of the number of families that would be impacted and helped, and we give them a taste of work and leadership. So, we're supposed to do that.

So, working on that and the affordable water plan, which I followed the great leadership of the honorable Maryann Mahaffey who was Council President when I arrived, who's a wonderful Council President, had a heart of gold and was always connecting with those who were left out, locked out, and always working for peace. Her last march, she had her little fist in the air, marching for peace and an end to war in this country. So, I was able to pick up the mantle of her leadership,

of Maryann Mahaffey, and become a leader with and a sponsor of affordable water for the City of Detroit. The city had been violating the legislation that I authored by discontinuing the affordable water plan which would have been a win-win situation. It would have helped the city generate more revenue. It would also make sure that nobody would have their water shut off. It's inhumane to turn off the water for anybody in the city surrounded by the Great Lakes. It's a disgrace before God that anybody have their water shut off.

We--the fact that so many of our homes have been emptied by predatory lenders who have been attacking our housing stock--because I believe because it's been primarily Black-owned Detroit, the largest Black homeowner base in the country. So, I believe that Detroit became a target because of that, and predatory lenders swooped in here and began doing dirt in order to take back...take properties and remove Black people and create this gentrification policy that is now the policy of Detroit. The fact that businesses that used to be owned in our neighborhoods, they're empty storefronts. The houses that used to be filled with families who were filling the neighborhood schools, many of the neighborhoods are empty, and many of the schools are now empty and unpopulated.

When the first school takeover happened in [19]99, I was working for [John] Conyers-- this was before I was on city council. I got a call from the then-Superintendent of City Schools, Eddie Green, who asked me to please ask the congressman if I could go represent the whole city in Lansing [Michigan] and speak against the school takeover that he knew was being plotted. I had to memorize the information because they wouldn't let me read it. So, I drove to Lansing and spoke before the Education Committee--Senate--and the state of Michigan and told them that there was a 93 million dollars surplus. There was no reason to take over Detroit Public Schools when you have a surplus. The graduation rates were increasing. Why would you take over a school system when the graduation rates were increasing, when the college attendance rate were increasing, when the school repairs are going forward, when the population is pleased with what's happening with the Detroit Public Schools?

They took the schools over anyway, and it was all about getting their hands on the 1.5 billion dollar bond that had been approved by the citizens of Detroit. So, they took that money, gave it to those who were well-known contributors to the

gubernatorial campaigns and right-wing campaigns and moved Black people out of positions of governance of their own school systems--the school system I graduated from--moved us out and brought emergency managers in and have brought the system to rack and ruin ever since and have the nerve to tell us that we're responsible for the deficit they created.

So, that's why many of us have sued, litigated. I'm one of the people that sued over the illegal bankruptcy because the city council nor the mayor never approved the bankruptcy of the City of Det--never even received it. We did not even see the--I'm an elected official, never saw the bankruptcy papers that were filed by Kevyn Orr who was the bankruptcy attorney when he was hired by Governor [Rick] Snyder. He was hired to do bankruptcy. So, it was a conspiratorial piece from beginning to the end. The mayor never saw it, city council never saw it. Kevyn Orr, the so-called emergency manager, wrote the bankruptcy papers so that it went to Governor Snyder and then went straight to governance to Judge [Steven] Rhodes.

I testified during the bankruptcy trial, and I looked at Rhodes the whole time I testified. I said, you know, "This bankruptcy trial shouldn't even be taking place because the bankruptcy never got approved by the municipality. Kevyn Orr doesn't even live here. How can someone who doesn't live here get something approved by the governor who hired him and make it to the municipal bankruptcy when the municipality never saw it, never approved it?"--and that's a violation of U.S. Federal Code. I read the Bankruptcy Code. Furthermore, the state of Michigan owes the city 731 million dollars in unpaid revenue sharing right now. So, how can somebody who owes the city money declare us bankrupt when they're one of the reasons we're not having as much financial resources as we ought to have? It's racist and disgraceful and illegal.

[0:32:56]

PB: I'll come back to this in greater depth shortly, but I want to back up just a little bit.

JW: I'm sorry.

PB: No, no, no. That was wonderful. But, I want to start just a couple steps back with your campaign, your election to city council. So, can you tell us why you decided to run?

JW: Actually, there was a tragic death. I was happy working for Conyers. I was writing speeches. I was sitting in a chair where Mother Parks used to sit, and I--I should note that he--while others were giving Mother Rosa Parks plaques and platitudes, he gave her employment, which provided healthcare and dignity because she was forced to leave Alabama. Her life was threatened. She and her husband Raymond Parks and--she and her mother and her husband moved to Detroit out of necessity because of the terrorism they were faced with among them in Alabama. So, I will always be grateful to the congressman for giving her a position and respect and dignity, and congressman told me once that he never had a staff person before ask to have their salary reduced except Rosa Parks. He said she came to him and said, "You know, every now and then, somebody gives me an award, and I can't come into the office. So, just lower my salary, please, because I'm not here everyday." He said, "Oh no!" He said, "First of all, she was being paid a modest salary." He said, "I never had a staff person ask me to lower their salary because somebody was giving them an award somewhere. No, Mrs. Parks, it's an honor for you to work in my office. So, no, I will not reduce your salary." But, integrity, character.

But, I was happily working for the Congressman, and a person who was serving on the City Council, Brenda Scott, had a stomach stapling operation on Labor Day weekend of 2002, and something went awry. There was a poisoning, a blood poisoning, that developed in a couple of days, and she passed away in her early forties, tragically. So when that tragic death occurred, I was commissioned by Reparations Ray Jenkins, who was the one who asked Congress to introduce the H.R. [House Resolution] 40 bill for reparations, by the honorable Maryann Mahaffy, the Honorable Erma L. Henderson, and others asked to run for council after Brenda Scott's position became open tragically. My first response was, "I don't want to be in politics. I'm happy working for a politician. That's enough." And, I've never run for office before. I didn't think I could win. I'm a little left to be running for office, and Erma Henderson said, "Don't say no yet. Talk to God first.

Get on your knees. Talk to the Lord. See what the Lord will respond in terms of your quest.”

And, I told her, “I will, but I understand Mayor [Kwame] Kilpatrick, even though he ran against Gil Hill for the mayor’s office, Mayor Kilpatrick is asking Gil Hill to run. Well, how can I beat Gil Hill?” Who had 100 percent name recognition from starring in *Beverly Hills Cop* with Eddie Murphy? And, he had been president of city council. He almost beat Kwame for the mayor's office. How could I possibly beat a man who has 100 percent name recognition who’s had all these important posts? She said, “Keep talking to the Lord. It’s not up to you. This may be your time.” And, I did. On election day 2003, CBS WWJ was announcing before the polls closed, “Well, Gil Hill is going to win by a landslide.” He didn’t win. I won in 2003, April 29, 2003, and I was sworn in May 14, 2003. When the so-called powers-that-be were shocked by my election, they rushed to get a casino vote on the table before I got on because they knew my proclivities.

[0:37:10]

PB: So, from your position on city council, I want to take us up to the point where emergency management comes in. Could you talk about some of the fights that you were waging from on the council?

JW: I stood up everyday to say it’s illegal. It’s illegal. First of all, the city can not be moved into bankruptcy because the city owns--city residents--own a Water Department that provides most of the freshwater used in this country, and the Water Department is an asset valued at 60 billion dollars. If you have an asset valued at 60 billion dollars, you’re not bankrupt. Secondly, the State of Michigan owes money, owes us a ton of money and revenue sharing that has been unpaid. We have other monies owed to the city. Joe Louis Arena, which was used by the [Detroit] Red Wings and the Ilitch family--we were told by a chief attorney in the attorney’s office--owed this city 180 million dollars at the time the Red Wings moved out of Joe Louis Arena.

When I learned that information, I left the city council floor--Floor 13 in City Hall--and went to the Mayor's floor, the 11th floor. It was an unexpected visit. I said, "Mr. Mayor"--at that point it was Dave Bing--"I just found out from Krystal Crittendon, Attorney Crittendon, that Olympia Entertainment owed the city of Detroit 180 million dollars. We've got to collect that money. We must collect that. You don't let somebody owe you that much money and not pay it." They said the contract--we should've been paid every time the Red Wings were on TV, every time they won a championship, every time they sold a bag of popcorn. A percentage of every parking fee should've gone to the city that's not been collected. They must pay. They must pay.

The mayor looked at me, and he was sitting in a cabinet room with his CFO [Chief financial officer] [Jack Martin? Jim Bonsall?] and all the alphabet soup. We're sitting around the table, and he said, "I know about that." I said, "Then why don't you collect it, Mr. Mayor?" "I have to talk to the governor first." I said, "It's not up to the governor. It's our bill. We're the city. What? What?" So, I stopped looking at him and started looking at the CFO. I said, "Okay, Mr. CFO. What's your position?" "JoAnn, I'm not going to counter the mayor." I said, "Something's wrong with you all. You don't let people owe you and not collect. We ought to stand for the people of Detroit," and I left office feeling very--actually--hurt, disappointed beyond my ability to describe. How do you let somebody owe you and say you have to talk to the governor first? Uh-uh. Stand up for your city. Stand up for your city. Protect your city. I stood up every day. Every day.

Called it the consent agreement. I already saw the writing on the wall. I knew a consent agreement was a prelude to a bankruptcy. Consent to what? No. We don't consent to be led and supervised because an executive so-called emergency manager is nothing that takes away the constitutional rights of citizens who have the right to be governed by people they put in office. So, an emergency manager on his face is illegal, unconstitutional, absolutely goes against the grain of Voting Rights Act. No state has the right to insert an authority over the rights and the governance of citizens to control every aspect of their lives. They did this with the school systems across--everywhere there's a Black predominant community in the state of Michigan, there's been an emergency manager over the school system and often over the cities. It's racist, it's unconstitutional, it's patently illegal, unlawful, and they did it because they could.

[0:41:01]

PB: So, for the record, if you were just point-blank about it: why did the state impose an emergency management on the city of Detroit?

JW: The state imposed emergency manager on the City of Detroit the same reason they did it for the Detroit Public Schools: to steal assets like Belle Isle, like the Water Department, which is now a regional authority. The law department told the city leaders that Belle Isle should not be accessed to the state despite their sending an agreement asking us to give it to them for 99 years because they owed the city money. The state declared that it was immune from that. It still declared itself immune from that decision, and they just went ahead and took Belle Isle. They wanted the assets. They wanted pensions. They wanted to break the hole of the promise, the commitment that had been made to retirees on pensions, on healthcare.

And, I told the City years earlier they were paying too much to Blue Cross Blue Shield. 300 million dollars a year was in the city budget annually appropriated for healthcare coverage for city employees. I never used it. I served on council for 10 years--never. I had my annual physical. I'm almost was never sick. I eat my own cooking, so, and I don't eat pork. Never used it. They were paying more to Blue Cross Blue Shield for my healthcare than they paid me in a salary--ridiculous! 300 million dollars is excessive, and I talked about it. That's another thing I talked about almost everyday at the council table, so much so Blue Cross Blue Shield actually hired a lame duck legislator, Samuel Buzz Thomas, who told me that he got his job because they said, "There's this Black woman on city council that talks about us every day, so we gotta get somebody there to lift our image and to represent us," and that's how he got his job as a lobbyist.

[0:43:21]

PB: So by the time emergency management was imposed, you'd been on the council for almost a decade.

JW: Yes. I was on council exactly 10 years.

PB: So, did you see the writing on the wall? Did you see this coming?

JW: That's why I chose not to run again. The union asked me, "Please run again. You are our most solid vote. We need you to stay on." I said, "I can't stay on because you need me on. Somebody needs to be out here." The first lawsuits that were organized--I left city council, walked to AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees] Headquarters on Lafayette, and called all the attorneys who were progressive in the city together. I said, "We need to sue. We can't wait till the other shoe drops." When the consent agreement was on its way, I said, "We need to have litigation going on. We need to sue them. This is illegal, unconstitutional, and we need to organize and sue." We had marches on Lansing. We had rallies. I would call meetings in the Coleman A. Young Municipal Center and the hearing--Erma L. Henderson hearing auditorium to organize people. So, we didn't just wait. We organized.

[0:44:23]

PB: So, what was the relationship like from your position on city council and the organizers in the city? What was that relationship like in confronting and opposing emergency management?

JW: The...it was interesting because some of those who would quietly say, "You know I'm with you, I just can't say it," because they were with the mayor's office or some of the staff, the bureaucratic staff members, who were kind of in the middle would send me information, notes. In fact, some still send me notes about how just what I predicted is happening with the city being besieged by institutional racism on all fronts as the number of buildings that used to be owned--there used to be 22 buildings in downtown Detroit owned by Black people. Now, there's one.

So, there's just some clear, palpable changes that occurred during my lifetime that I can point out and direct, and some of them are related to gentrification, institutional racism, systemic displacement of people who used to be the largest Black homeowner base in the country and the desecration of Black-owned businesses and neighborhoods. It's been deliberate, and it's an onslaught. It's systematic and intentional, and if persons who have positions of responsibilities don't own the need to lead in change in the same way we responded to the little lady in her seventies who had received a water bill saying they were going to put a lien on her house, a bill she didn't owe--you need somebody to stand up and fight for those situations, and you have to do it every day, and you can't leave it to somebody else.

[0:46:30]

PB: So, I wanted to ask about the Detroit Marshall Plan...

JW: Yes.

PB: ...before emergency management. So, can you tell us about what the Detroit Marshall Plan was, what its origins were?

JW: I sponsored the Detroit Marshall Plan that really, of course, the Marshall Plan taken from the Marshall Plan that used to rebuild Europe after World War Two because Detroit needs to be rebuilt, and we rebuilt, and I was one that--on my own dime, I went to Washington D.C. to argue on behalf of the auto industry being bolstered and being supported by the federal government because this is an auto town. I did not want to have the aftermath, the consequences of the decline of the auto industry being visited on my city. So, I went there and advocated, and we were successful. However, while the auto industry was refueled, there was no concomitant refueling of the city which is the face of the auto industry.

So, I said the city needed to be rebooted in terms of housing stock, in terms of an economy, in terms of making sure we had a new green technology ushered in to our ability to deliver services, making sure that we get rid of the toxins that ruminate from the incinerator that I sponsored several pieces of legislation that should have been closed a long time ago, which adds decay and toxicity to our community. So, the Marshall Plan--and we were blessed to have Dr. Soji Adelaja, who then was a vice president of Michigan State University. He had more trips to Detroit and did more hearings on the Marshall Plan. I put it in the hands of President Barack Obama personally. One of my visits to the White House where I was blessed to be every now and then was able to get invited by Congressman Conyers or with the Congressional Black Caucus. So, we did everything we could. I also submitted to Senator [Carl] Levin before he retired from the U.S. Senate and to Congress.

So, we did everything we could do to try and get the federal attention on Detroit needing a Marshall Plan investment. In the same way you invested in the auto industry, you need to invest in this home of the auto industry of Detroit. The Marshall Plan looked at the greening technology. It looked at electricity having a new kind of power grid. It looked at solar. It looked at wind as an energy provider. It also talked about the need to bring in and recruit young people from everywhere into this community and how to bolster the arts, tie in new arts, bridging with the tech conference that happens every May in downtown Detroit and connect that to Motown. You're not taking advantage of the Motown industry that's right here. We still have people who are from the Motown industry that are connected who have never left. We shouldn't let that lay ferment. So, that Marshall Plan was very exciting. It was approved by the city. It was approved by the Michigan State University which allowed Dr. Soji Adelaja to spend tons of hours here working with an organizer and trying to help lift the Marshall Plan opportunity. It is still waiting to be supported. I'm not giving up on it.

[0:49:56]

PB: So, what happened with it in the meantime?

JW: We need champions. The champions can't just be a former or retired council member. You need champions who are citizens, who are legislators. You need somebody in the executive branch to be a champion and someone in the state level who understands that really as Detroit goes, so goes the state. So, those people think that they can watch Detroit go down and somehow they can still rise up, no! What used to be seen as a quote 'drunk' problem in Detroit is now an opioid problem everywhere in the state, everywhere in this country. So, there's always a connection between an urban hub and the arteries of the suburban entities. There's no disconnect. They are connected.

[0:50:53]

PB: Do you see that as a possibility, something to organize around?

JW: Yes, I do. I do, and I believe that the young people, who are filled with hope and idealism and who are not going to be really drawn into negative conversations and negative groups, they give us an opportunity to have a strong approach to restore, renew, revitalize, and transform this beloved community which deserves it.

[0:51:29]

PB: Do you see a connection between the Detroit Marshall Plan and the Green New Deal?

JW: Yes, I do, and it's wonderful. It's wonderful, it's... Actually, it's one of the brightest things happening on the horizon because it's right here, and all we need to do is make sure that the marketing is done well enough into the hearts and minds of Detroit families so that they own it. I want them to own it so that it can create a rich harvest that all of us can profit from.

[0:52:09]

PB: So, kind of jumping back into the emergency management discussion in terms of like the immediate fight against it, do you recall any specific protests or demonstrations at City Hall or at City Council Chambers while you were sitting?

JW: Yes. There was one that was led by the great Reverend Bill Wylie-Kellermann and Elena Herrada, and they were...they adopted a strong stand against a terrible piece of legislation that had come before council. I supported them, took their stand. Some of the leaders of the council decided to take a recess and urged the security...that police officers to take them out. They got on the floor and refused to be taken out. So, I stayed. Even though council was supposed to vote in recess, I wouldn't leave my seat because I wouldn't leave my seat or somebody else, another council member who was left of center, came back and sat in her seat, and we kind of stood guard to protect them, Bill Wylie-Kellermann and Elena Herrada, to make sure that nothing untoward would happen to them from law enforcers who really didn't want to touch them and take them out. Eventually, they got taken out, but they were taken out in a way that they were left whole. They were left whole. So, they were not treated in an inhumane fashion. They were put in jail and the detainment for these two warriors was something that I responded to and showed up at 36th District Court and said they'd done nothing wrong.

So, this kind of--we had protestors show up during the stage of the emergency manager and the consent agreement. The gallery was regularly filled with citizens who were yelling, who were given two minutes to speak, who were saying, "Don't do it. Don't sell out council. Don't do it. Don't agree with it. Don't do it." They were typically--the votes were 7 to 2, and I was one of the no votes against the consent agreement, against the emergency manager, against all the lawless, ruthless, unconstitutional, illegal behaviors that happened throughout that period. So, I was very blessed with good health, so I never had a sick day. I was there every single day. Started early, stayed late.

Meanwhile, you still had to answer the issues that were confronting citizens. While all this was going on, I had a citizen cop call my office one evening and say that some robbers were in their house, and they called the police precinct who told them they were having a shift change, and they couldn't respond to it. They're hiding in a closet while the criminals in their house are stealing their stuff.

[sighs] I sighed. That's another person. I said, "Well, give me your address. I'm on my way, but I don't have a light on top of my car nor do I carry a gun, so I'm going to have to call the mayor's office and the chief of police office to have them send some people to their house to protect you. I don't want to be coming to your funeral. I want you to still be alive. So, stay in the closet and just know I'm on my way." I got there, called Mayor Kilpatrick's office, and he said he'd listen and wasn't crazy about me calling giving him orders, but he let some of his people beat me to her house, and Chief Ella Bully-Cummings did the same thing. So, you know, you still have to respond to that kind of issue. You still have to govern on behalf of the city. We couldn't just do our action and litigation and organizing against the emergency manager. You still had to take care of the people.

[0:56:28]

PB: So, how do you explain those five other votes that were siding with the consent decree and with emergency management?

JW: They were frightened. Lack of courage, lack of center of who they were representing. Never...you should never lose sight of why you're here. When you're in a legislative position, you're there to represent the people. Of the people, by the people, for the people. It should never be about honoring what the press is saying or what the so-called powers-that-be want you to do. The executive branch never even bothered to call me because they already knew.

[0:57:15]

PB: So, what was the press saying at this time?

JW: The press was saying that people like me were divisive. We were standing in the way of improvement. It was just so racist, so racist. The community had no respect for those who sold out, who did not support the community, who did not stand up. They had no respect.

[0:57:44]

PB: And what were the implications for their political careers?

JW: Well, all I can say is I was invited to a block club association to speak this past holiday, and it was nice to be asked to a block club on the far East Side to speak. I didn't know until it was near the end of the meeting that there was a city council member in the audience, who after--and they gave a nice response to me. I basically gave the same speech I gave you about the importance of us owning and controlling our own destiny, and I didn't know there was an elected official in the house, a city council member was in the house. At a certain point, he stood up, was trying to make it to the podium, and the chair of the block club said, "Oh, no. No, we see you. Go on and sit down now." That said everything to me.

[0:58:38]

PB: So, do you... What impact do you think that experience with the city council siding with the consent decree, siding with the interests outside of Detroit in that situation, has that had...do you think that's had any impact among public trust or public engagement?

JW: Yes. Oh, yes. Yes. People... Because of the particular history, the unique history of Detroit as a freedom fighting city, as a city with a history of revolutionary activists and lawyers and people who are not afraid--I mean, Malcolm X walked here. Reparations Ray Jenkins convinced Congress to introduce the Reparations Bill here. This is where UAW got founded. The Republic of New Afrika got started here. The Shrine of the Black Madonna got founded in Detroit. The Nation of Islam was founded in Detroit. How does this city--which had the largest Black home ownership in the nation and founded Motown--how does this city suddenly get a crowd of Black folks who don't know how to stand up and represent their people, who are afraid to stand up for their people? It should not be. It should not be.

[0:59:51]

PB: I want to ask you a little bit more about that later.

JW: Yes.

PB: But--I want to make sure that we have a good chunk of time to talk about the water affordability plan. But before getting into the particulars of that, we can hash that out. What were some of the immediate impacts once the consent decree was put in place and emergency management and bankruptcy was moving forward?

JW: Well, there became a strong wash of people who don't live here taking over key positions and getting contracts, making decisions. People were being paid to offer assessments about where the city ought to go, and what I was told by city employees that these guys would sit them down, ask them a bunch of questions, get the information from city employees, and then get paid for it. There were persons who had no background with the city who still got paid thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars as consultants who were supposed to help lead the city out of crisis--out of a manufactured crisis.

The crisis was that the constitutional rights of the city had been displaced. The real crisis was the people who had a right to select their own governance, who put mayors, city council members, school board members in place now had people that don't live here, that don't pay taxes here making all the decisions and putting their lives at risk, taking away their sense of self determination and their right of home rule and doing it with no fear because the advocates who were trying to stop it and who were rallying and organizing against it had been pointed to by the local press as divisive and against the grain for not going along with the program. They shouldn't be there. They're anti-corporate. So, the organized efforts to help keep the people as a center of priority and keep the people respected and honored and supported was in spite of what the governing bodies linked to emergency management were geared up to do.

The Detroiters who were still here are in spite of because they've crippled the neighborhoods. They've closed dozens of schools. The jobs that used to go...the jobs that used to go to people who primarily were Detroiters--Detroit used to have something in the charter that said if you work for the City of Detroit, you ought to live in the City of Detroit. When Mayor Young was out of office, the police unions and the fire unions went to Lansing and got legislation ready to undo that particular part of the city charter. So now, the uniformed officials who work for the city of Detroit, some of them live 15 miles away. They live 60 miles away. Some of them don't even live in the state. And when there's an emergency, who knows whether they can get back in time under this homeland security kind of climate.

So, the notion that if Detroit is good enough to pay you, it ought to be good enough for you to live in, that got wiped away with the same level of anti-Black systemic, institutional racism that began to--the same kind of stuff interestingly, that is happening right now with America. The reaction to President Barack Obama's presidency over an eight-year period is to put in somebody who is...who is connected--who calls him a white nationalist, who is connected with white supremacy, and who is connected--who sees nothing wrong with white supremacist murders happening in Charleston [South Carolina] and other places, who is the worst symbol of the worst levels of humanity in this country. That same kind of impact, feedback, backlash, happened after the 20-year tenure of the honorable Coleman Alexander Young. I can look back and see.

[1:04:26]

PB: I'm glad you said that because that's something that Junius [Williams] and I spent a lot of time talking about in Newark...

JW: Yeah.

PB: ...in the aftermath of Ken Gibson's election there.

JW: Yeah.

PB: So from that perspective, do you see this situation of emergency management, this disenfranchisement in...

JW: I think there should be a suit. I think that everything that happened was race-based, illegal, unconstitutional on its face, and we still need some courageous litigants to call it for what it was. They stole the money with the Detroit Public Schools. They are currently stealing assets from the City of Detroit for reasons that have nothing to do with improving services or improving the city. It was all about enriching those who don't deserve it, stealing assets, and to hell with the people.

[1:05:20]

PB: So, can you see that from a broader perspective, not just historically but nationally and globally?

JW: Yes, it is happening--gentrification is not just happening--of course, it's not just happening in Detroit. It's happening in Harlem [New York City, New York]. It's happening in Washington D.C. It's happening in Camden, New Jersey. Everywhere you look, there is some level of gentrification that is displacing people who have been Black, brown, poor, who have had certain levels of ownership and investments, who have basically had those investments stolen or dispossessed.

[1:06:02]

PB: So, what's the connection? Why is this happening?

JW: I think that in the same way that some parents have now been exposed as not being interested in letting their children get to college in a fair and balanced way but wanted to make sure they had an upper hand in getting in with money or privilege. There are forces in America that don't ever want an even playing field. They believe they ought to have access to privilege and favor, and they will do all they can to make sure that happens with housing, with land, with money, with capital, with development.

[1:06:47]

[whispering]

Herbert Taylor [HT]: ...check on time.

JW: What time is it?

HT: It's 10:33 right now.

JW: Okay.

HT: You said you had a class at 11?

JW: Mm-hmm.

[inaudible]

JW: You're okay. I'm good.

PB: What time do you have to leave?

JW: Ahh...about fifteen minutes.

[1:07:13]

PB: Gotcha. So, let's move into talking about water then.

JW: Okay.

PB: So, can you just for the record, from the perspective of--

JW: I was a sponsor of the affordable water legislation which was introduced as a resolution. Ordinance would have been stronger, but a resolution also has the weight of law, and it was easier to get a resolution passed during that period. It was not something that everyone was in favor of. The Water Department director at that time, who later was indicted, was against it--Victor Mercado. Mayor Kilpatrick initially was opposed to it. Then later, after he got in trouble, became so enamored of my legislation that he tried to call it his, had a press conference, and didn't invite me [laughs] to announce his water affordability [laughs].

We the People of Detroit, which is a wonderful organization founded by Monica Lewis-Patrick, Debra Taylor, Chris Griffith, and Cecily McClellan and Aurora Harris, was developing its roots, and they were very active in helping to provide--Cecily in particular was working for the City at that point. When we first approved the water affordability plan, she volunteered for it and was assigned to be one of the people helping to connect citizens whose water was near shut off to a plan where they could pay what they could afford to pay, and the city would make arrangements to keep their water on. So, this--thousands of people were helped as a result of Cecily McClellan, who we called Ebony, and others.

And, we were--for those who say that it was illegal to have a water affordability plan, which was our biggest fight. We were blessed because Victor Mercado, in one of the many hearings I convened on the importance of having water for the building, he let it slip that there was 5 million dollars held off budget only in Detroit with people who were paying late and were delinquent on their water bills. He said--he was kind of thinking out loud in the microphone at one of our hearings and said, "You know, we do have \$5 million off budget." I said, "Woo!" At that point, I was sitting at the council table thinking, "Ah-ha!" 'cause we had been threatened by a potential litigation if we did this affordable water plan because some were saying it's illegal to take ratepayers' resources and help people, it's a violation of this law and that law. It's not a violation if you use the money off budget, if it's only coming from Detroiters who are delinquent and paying their bills. I asked for all 5 million. What Victor Mercado approved was 2.5 million, half of it. We took it, and that was enough for Cecily McClellan and the Department of the City of Detroit's Emergency Services to help people who were--had nothing else to turn to. This helped so many people, and they got help by money that did not take anything away from anybody else. It was money being held off budget, and it was a win-win situation.

I was blessed to have been on council during that period because before I was on council, before Brenda [Scott] ever passed away and her seat became vacant, when I was still working for [John] Conyers, Maryann Mahaffey, who then was president of the council, was organizing with the wonderful Maureen Taylor and Marian Kramer and the people who were connected with the Michigan League for Human Services and Marilyn Mullane and Ted Philips to put together a water affordability plan that involved bringing in experts from the East Coast who would talk about how this is not only good for humanity, it was also economically good for the city because it increased the city's revenue. More people would pay if it was affordable, and we need to help people maintain their water at all costs because water is a human right. You can't live without water. I was--so, I was blessed to have that engagement before.

So once I got on council, Maryann Mahaffey had strong support of me. So instead of her having to meet on the second floor because she said she was not getting support from her colleagues on the thirteenth floor. So, she wasn't even having the organizing meetings on the thirteenth floor because it was a chilling effect. But once I came on strong and had been connected with the water affordability

organizing as a staffer with Congress, now an elected official, Mahaffey and I were joined at the hip on this, and we brought the meetings back to the city council legislative table, had multiple hearings, had brought the community members in, asked them to organize and to advocate on their own behalf, and we talked about water as a human right. No family should have to suffer without water. How can the children go to school? How can elders take their medicines? How can people engage in hygiene? You must have water. You must have water. So, we just took a no debate approach to water and just muscled it through.

[1:12:57]

PB: So, can you explain the difference between assistance and affordability?

JW: Yeah, well, water assistance is supposed to be a euphemism that makes people think it's affordable, but no. Water assistance is some kind of a weak-knee plan on paper that tells people they're supposed to pay what the bill says you owe, and if you don't pay it, your water will still be cut off. So, water assistance means nothing. Water affordability means you tie it in with the income. You tie it in with the household realities of the population in the house. You tie it into what's going on, the reality. And also, water affordability connects with policies that--there are national policies that identify what percentage of the household's income ought to be going toward utilities. So, water assistance is not impressive to me at all. It's a euphemism that's designed to trick people into thinking this is somehow helping poor people. It's only helping those in charge think that they could schmooze over the human rights issues which are daunting to too many people, and to have one in seven households in the city of Detroit have their water turned off is an outrage. It's indefensible, it's outrageous, and the water affordability should be the first order of business on the demands that citizens should make of everybody in elected office, everybody. If they're not on the stand, not drawing a line on water affordability, they should not be in office.

[1:14:54]

PB: So, what's the state of that struggle for the Water Affordability Plan right now?

JW: There are persons at the state level, there are persons at the local level who are talking about it. Quite frankly, I'm waiting to see the yeast fermented and the bread sliced. I want to see it happen because it's not easy, and I know that having been through it. Got called names, got--I told you about when Mayor Kilpatrick finally did support it, he had a press conference and didn't invite those of us who sponsored the legislation and voted for it. He was trying to save himself. It had nothing to do with...with it. We are connected with water in this area, and I believe the human rights issue of water is something that should always be put on the front burner. We should allow nobody to hide behind so-called water assistance. Water affordability is the mantra.

[1:15:56]

PB: What's it going to take--from an organizational perspective, from an organizing front--what's it going to take to get that water affordability?

JW: I believe it should be the mantra in churches, every community group, every block club. Everybody who calls themselves a leader, everyone who has access to a medium ought to be forcing water affordability as a front burner item. Anybody talking about running for office, they must declare themselves on the side of the people with water affordability. It's unconscionable that anybody in the city surrounded by the Great Lakes have their water shut off. It's inhumane, it's unrighteous, and everybody's impacted by it. People who have their water shut off, that doesn't mean they're not working somewhere. Some of them are delivering--making coffee at McDonald's with unwashed hands. So, everybody--so, the serving people at the drive-thru help me now. So, for the people who think it's those people, everybody's impacted. When one of us is impacted, all of us are impacted. We all must be a part of the fight. We must be part of the victory. Until all of us have water, truly none of us is operating in a hygiene situation. That's why Hepatitis Three [C?] is waging in this community.

[1:17:14]

PB: So, when people listen to and watch this interview, what advice would say...

JW: Organize. Organize. Organize. Don't wait and see what somebody else is going to do. Jump into it. If they're not talking about it at your church, you be the convener of the meeting at your church. If somebody comes into your community-based organization saying they want to run for office, ask them where they stand on affordable water. What have you done for the least of these? Who have you marched for? Who have you protested for? Who have you demonstrated for? What have you done to make a difference in the lives of our people? Nobody should hear a little voice in their head telling them to run for anything except for cover if they're not helping the people. You ought to help the people.

[1:18:00]

PB: How would you assess--and answer this how you want, of course--how would you assess the current city council's performance?

JW: I won't assess. I'll let the people do the assessment.

PB: I know that's kind of a loaded question. What--if you're connecting the dots between the water crisis, the foreclosure crisis...

JW: They're all connected. Education, I believe the takeover of Detroit Public Schools was a dress rehearsal for the takeover of the City of Detroit and the assets. In both instances, assets were taken, and the same right-wing folks got them, people who were not concerned about the constitutional rights and protections of the citizens of Detroit, who don't respect the City of Detroit. It's the disrespect that goes back to the tenure of honorable Coleman A. Young.

[1:18:55]

PB: So, you've had your radio program for some time now, ...

JW: I have.

PB: ...and that's, I think, a big part of narrative building, narrative change. Could you talk a little bit about your program and the role of the media in promoting those kind of narratives?

JW: I've been very blessed to host a show called Wake Up Detroit, which I had to trademark to keep other people from saying it. Now, you have to get my permission. Fox 2--I woke up one morning, and I heard them saying, "Wake Up, Detroit! It's Fox 2." I thought, uh-oh. I called my attorney, and he sent them a letter saying you can either pay Ms. Watson, or you can cease and desist. They sent a letter the next day saying, "We're going to cease and desist. We're not paying Ms. Watson for saying 'Wake Up Detroit.'" [laughs]

The owner of WCHB, which is the oldest Black-owned radio station in the country, Dr. Mary Bell, called me one day and said she heard me promoting NAACP membership recruitments when I was a Director of the NAACP. She said, "You know, your voice would lend well for radio. We're getting ready to move from oldies but goodies to talk shows on WCHB, and I wonder if you would consider being a part of our talks. I would love to invite you to do that." I said, "Dr. Bell, what you don't know is my major at University of Michigan was journalism, and my father's been waiting for me to get into the line of work I was trained for. [laughs] He's been wondering how long the civil rights stuff would hold me. So, it would be my honor to open talk on WCHB." During my tenure on WCHB, then WGPR--now, I'm on WHPR and WHPS, television and radio--all Black-owned.

Many of the movements have been chronicled. For a period, I was on everyday on morning talk. When I ran for office, initially, I couldn't be on every day because it was an unfair advantage. So, I stopped doing Monday through Friday. Now, I do only on Thursday, and I'm maintaining that. But, had people like Dick Gregory, who was my good friend, Mother Rosa Parks would call in every now and then. We

would cover issues like political, economic justice, human rights, international. We had one of the significant leaders of organized labor come on when the labor issues were confronting the auto industry. We've had peace activists of all backgrounds come on. So, it's been a good window to use as an organizing tool for people who listen who want to turn to a place that will get them truth. What I don't do is negative talk. I don't--I just can't abide a lot of negative, hostile rancor. There's enough of that. So, we organize, we bless people, and we continue to put faith at the epicenter of our force.

[1:22:11]

PB: So--and coming back to politics, what would you...how would you analyze the role of electoral politics within Black freedom struggles? We can think about that historically. We can think about it right now because I think that's an important question people are reckoning with, particularly with President Obama's administration and...

JW: There have been some things achieved politically, but the biggest road to cross is economics. When I came to the Detroit City Council and introduced a concept called Africantown--not because I was trying to upset anybody else. Detroit has a Mexicantown and Greektown. It's had an Asiantown. But Detroit, at that point, was 90 percent Black and only owned 1.5 percent of businesses in this community. That's apartheid. You need to own something and not just consume if you live here, and I was born in an era when we did own. I was a baby, and I remember Paradise Valley. There were Black pharmacies and Black stores, Black cleaners. There were Black stores and businesses. These businesses no longer exist. As a matter of fact, the [Dwight] Eisenhower administration put a freeway through the Black businesses of that period, and they've never come back.

So, Dr. Claud Anderson, who's the author of *PowerNomics [The National Plan to Empower Black America]* and *Black Labor, White Wealth [The Search for Power and Economic Justice]*, at my request came to Detroit and did a study--an economic study--looking at what kind of industries we ought to be supporting in a district that would support the Black community not just being consumers but being enterprisers, being owners. It got hit by all kinds of--lambasted by the

media, which falsely claimed it was anti-white. Now, the truth is Greektown got its start from a Black mayor, Coleman A. Young, who took the Greektown founders to the pension fund which invested--Detroit Pension Fund, public funds--invested in Greektown. That's how they got their start. The significance of Mexicantown got millions and millions from federal government empowerment, so, funds voted on by people like Barbara Rose-Collins, a Black woman from Detroit. So, the notion that something that is designed to incorporate into a version of businesses owned--not just patronized--by Black, but patronized by everybody. But, to have an epicenter of businesses owned by the people who live here should have only been treated with Hosanna, not revision.

We set up a Paradise Valley--when HUD [Housing and Urban Development] said they thought Africantown was a divisive term, we just changed it to Paradise Valley. So, there's a Paradise Valley district in downtown Detroit right now that has a park in the middle named after Beatrice Buck, who was one of Mayor Young's best friends, and marble stones identifying Joe Louis and Erma Henderson and Coleman Young and others and a restaurant and a community center and even the Michigan Chronicle, a Black newspaper, providing the--and I have put street signs up to kind of mark the area. One sign marking Reparations Ray Jenkins, one sign marking Kwame Atta, who is now an ancestor, and another sign marking Harold McKinney, one of the great jazz masters of Detroit. Detroit is a great jazz town, and I wanted to make sure he was chronicled, and the secondary street signs we established--and that Paradise Valley, which is really the Africantown District in Downtown Detroit. So, it's economics that has never been bridged, and that remains the last frontier for true revolutionary activity that will help move people of African descent, people in not only this community but communities around the country, to places of ownership, self determination, and respect and dignity.

[1:26:25]

PB: 10:53.

JW: Oh.

PB: Do you have time for a couple more?

JW: Actually, I need to move.

PB: Okay.

JW: Yeah.

[1:26:34]

PB: Can I ask you one more just about--well, can I get to one about your vision for an equitable Detroit and then another about any remembrances you want to share about Mama Lila [Cabbil]?

JW: I believe that Detroit's greatness is still here, and even greater times are ahead. Lila Cabbil was an invaluable resource and ally and--not just the movement for water rights, but in the movement for human rights. She worked very closely with the Rosa and Raymond Parks Center for Social Change. She was a former official for the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute [for Self-Development] founded by Mother Parks. She was very, very active academically with her children. She was a movement in and of herself and in water rights and in social justice and human rights. So, she will always be remembered as a force to be reckoned with and one who was never shy about standing up for women's movement's marches and rallies and meetings, human rights' marches and rallies, water rights' marches and rallies and meetings. She loved being called Mama Lila, and her force will be eternal.

PB: Thank you.

JW: Thank you.