

TRANSCRIPT – JOSHUA PARKS

Interviewee: Joshua Parks

Interviewer: Mills Pennebaker

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Mills Pennebaker: Okay, this is Mills Pennebaker. It's Sunday, April 18th. For the recording, could you say your name, please?

Joshua Parks: My name is Joshua Parks, j-o-s-h-u-a p-a-r-k-s.

MP: And we're here mostly to talk about all of the work you've been doing in Charleston and the Lowcountry, the activism, mutual aid, but I thought we could start maybe with some fun little childhood background? So if you want to talk a little bit about where you grew up, family, friends, neighbors, kids you ran around with.

JP: I was born in Philadelphia, but I never--once I was born thereafter like two years, we moved down South because my entire family's from there. I was there because my dad was in the military at the time. So I was born in Philadelphia, but I was raised in Jacksonville, Florida. Growing up, well, I was raised quote unquote, raised Catholic. I went to Catholic school, Sunday school, I should say, I went to public school, but I went to Sunday school at a Catholic school. My mother was Catholic because she's from Pensacola, Florida, which is on the Gulf coast, near Alabama. And that region has a lot of Black people that do practice Catholicism because obviously the French used to, French and Spanish were all up in that area so there's that influence that's still there. So I grew up Catholic in quote unquote Catholic in faith, but it's not your typical strict Catholic

household, not strict at all. It was mostly culturally Catholic because--the same way Southern Baptists in this region or Methodists, it's Catholic in that region. So I grew up that way.

I went to public school my whole life. I played basketball since a young age. Ball used to be life until I realized that you had to be really, really, really, extremely good, ridiculously good to make it anywhere in basketball. I was pretty decent, I was pretty good, but I was nowhere near as good as the folks that make it. After coming to that realization, I decided that I had to go to school to actually learn, or go to college to actually learn. And I went to University of West Florida. That was the first college that I went to, which is in Pensacola, Florida, where my mother's side is from. I went there for about a year and I wasn't really happy with the school environment. Very white school, it was very racist school as far as the students that went there, and it just wasn't a very pleasant place for Black students.

I remember I saw a video on YouTube. It was a video of Dr. Martin Luther King and Kwame Ture, formerly known as Stokely Carmichael back then. And it was a video, I believe it was the March Against Fear in like '65 or six-ish, four, five, or six, around that time. And I remember the clip because Martin Luther King, you know, there's a whole bunch of people: you have Martin Luther King walking and you have Kwame Ture walking side by side, and the reporter asked Martin Luther King, he was like, "Do you think you're going to be able to keep this nonviolent?" And Martin Luther King gave his normal spiel of like, yes, he was committed to non-violence, that was his principles. Then at the time, Kwame Ture, who I didn't know of, he was just a young, young dude. I didn't know who he was. Now this was my introduction to him. And the reporter asked Kwame

Ture the same question and Kwame Ture basically said, no, he rejected that philosophy. He basically said that they should be worried about the white people being nonviolent toward us. And I had never, at that time, I never heard that articulated that way because you know, the dominant narrative growing up with the public school system and just American media in general is non-violence and the civil rights movement's theme of non-violence, even though that was not the case at all in the beginning, but that's what we're taught. So hearing that articulated for the first time, that resonated with me and I was like, "Dang, who is this?"

So I looked him up, I looked Kwame Ture up. I watched all his speeches on YouTube. I bought his books, I read his books, and then I found out that he went to Howard University. I was like, "Dang, I want to be like him! He went to Howard, if I go to Howard, I'm going to be like that too!" Young, naive, and stupid. I was like, "If I go to that school, then--" like the school actually produces the student, which partially it does, but at the same time, it doesn't. So I transferred to Howard that same semester. Got to Howard. And it was like overall, it was a great experience. I love DC and I love the people that I've met at Howard and the experiences I had, the classes, the teachers and students, the campus, et cetera.

But it was also a challenge at Howard because there was, for the first time in my life, I met a certain class of Black people. They come from places where they have a lot of money and some have, like, for instance, didn't know it existed, people grew up with maids. People grew up with house people, people grew up with nannies. And that just wasn't where I'm from. I grew up basically working-class. If you had a kid, your grandma watched him if you couldn't watch him, or you might send them to daycare, which is

expensive, or you had a family member, or you had a friend. But just hearing kids, Black kids that came from certain backgrounds such as that was kind of jarring at first. Because you have an idealized idea of what an HBCU is, especially Howard because it's one of the most popular. And then you have shows like *In Living Color*, et cetera, that show what life would be like, and you realize it's not like--I mean, Hillman is, it's kind of, there are some instances where it's like Hillman on TV or whatever, but a lot of instances it's not. It was a struggle between those two worlds, but I will say that I've met a lot of people that I needed to meet.

I like to say that I got my degree from Howard University, but I definitely got educated at the bookstore across the street where I worked called Sankofa Bookstore. It was Black-owned and one of the few Black-owned bookstores that are left in the United States. From the people I learned from, it's just a community that they had there of intellectuals, of working people, of Black people from different places, Ethiopia. The owner is Ethiopian, his wife was African-American. His name is Haile Gerima and her name is Shirikiana [Aina] Gerima. And basically they're Black filmmakers and Haile Gerima was the pioneer of Black film. He made the film "Sankofa," which the bookstore is named after, which is a legendary Black film that everybody should watch. He made "Bush Mama." He made "Teza," so many films and internationally acclaimed films, but he's not a household name because he kind of rejected Hollywood. He could have been the next whatever, but his principles wouldn't allow him to be pimped out by Hollywood. And his wife is also, Shirikiana Gerima is a great filmmaker in her own. She has a documentary called "Footprints of Pan-Africanism" that was also very influential on me. I spent a lot of time at the bookstore, un-learning learning a lot of stuff while relearning

other things about myself and my community. So that's my zero years old to like twenty-one years old in a nutshell.

MP: In a flash! You said the name of the bookstore--

JP: Sankofa.

MP: What's the meaning of that?

JP: Sankofa is basically a West African tree proverb. Basically in a nutshell, it means you can't move forward without recognizing or learning your past. And so it's usually depicted by a bird that has his neck oriented toward the past, basically saying learn your history so that you can make the correct decisions in your future. That's really what his film was about. His film, "Sankofa" was about Black people, and really everyone, reckoning with the past of slavery. And you know how, even though slavery doesn't exist, quote, air quotes, doesn't exist today, the entire Atlantic world, and really the whole world was built on slavery. So it's kind of a film where a woman is blasted to her past as an enslaved person and she, it was a hell of an experience for her. And that's all I'll say on the film because I encourage people to watch it.

MP: No spoilers.

JP: Yeah.

MP: And I've heard that phrase around here in the Gullah Geechee community a little bit. So did you learn about Gullah Geechee community before working at the bookstore, before moving to DC?

JP: Well, I would say that I was raised Gullah Geechee but I didn't really know it until I left, which is like the story of a lot of people, especially with Gullah Geechee culture. Most of our parents and grandparents, it used to be almost a pejorative to call

someone Geechee because it had a certain connotation. It meant that you country, you're unlearned, you're uneducated, you're Geechee. Also denoted a certain speech pattern, Gullah Geechee language, which was called--you'll hear people, not so much today, but probably prior to the 21st century, you'll hear people call someone who spoke a certain way Geechee. Because they couldn't understand them. They would call them Geechee simply for the fact they couldn't understand them. And Gullah is a language that if you don't have the ear for it, then you probably can't understand.

But it got tended to pejorative, of course. I say that to say growing up in a Gullah Geechee household, that my father's Gullah Geechee, he's from Sol Legare Island, James Island. And my mother is from Pensacola, Florida, which is more of a Creole influence, Black and Creole. So I grew up in a house that was kind of a mixture of both, but there's a lot of similarities such as the food ways and things like that. But I didn't know, I didn't really realize how distinctly Southern the culture was until I went to DC. Then I realized that, oh, people don't eat rice every day with every meal. We did growing up, we'd eat rice and beans every day. They don't eat certain things, which I thought was just food. But then to other people, those are like, quote, unquote, ethnic foods or like sub-genres of food, but to us it was everyday food. So things like food ways.

I remember going--because I was raised in Jacksonville and I used to come here, come to Sol Legare Island where my family is from like every summer and holidays and stuff. I would remember the distinct speech pattern, but I didn't attribute it to anything. I just, I didn't know. I didn't understand that it was a Gullah Geechee cultural thing. I just thought that's the way my family speaks. Until I actually started learning about the actual culture of Gullah Geechee and realizing that my parents and grandparents probably didn't

use the term or identify with Gullah Geechee because it was shunned. But now it's finally starting to be celebrated, which is good because a lot of people grew up--especially in Charleston and the Lowcountry area where it's highly concentrated, like going to educate public school systems where they try to assimilate the language out of you. So the culture's not only being assaulted as far as the land, because the land, a lot of Gullah Geechee land is being seized by developers and gentrification and stuff. So you can't have a culture of people who are displaced, constantly being displaced, but as well as like in educational institutions, there's an assault on Gullah Geechee culture as well.

MP: I had a question earlier. Oh, did you also pick up photography and filmmaking same place? Because you're a fantastic, fantastic filmmaker and photographer.

JP: Thank you so much. I would say that I've always had an interest in images because ever since I was a kid, back when BET was actually a good network and they played like all the good Black films, I used to watch, you know, *The Boys in the Hood* and *Fridays* and all these different films that had--*Menace II Society*--they had a profound impact on me as a child. They used to come all the time, but every time they came on, I would watch them. So I always had that connection, like dang, this is like--I felt connected to it. The images and the stories that are being told. And I think like subconsciously I didn't act on it as a child or as an adolescent. It wasn't until I went to Sankofa because I thought movies just came out of thin air. Like I didn't, I didn't know. I didn't have any idea of the process.

But when I went to Sankofa and I was around these filmmakers, photographers, artists, visual artists, all different types of mediums of artists, Black artists that are telling

the stories, I got to see the process and it demystified the process for me. Haile actually, I think he invited me to--it was in Florida. We went to a site called Fort Negro, which was right outside, west of Tallahassee, which is in what they call Apalachicola, Florida. And the Fort Negro was a Black fort, one of a few Black forts that was in Florida during the 19th century. Florida used to be a Spanish colony, of course. And during that time, what we call the Seminole Wars and the War of 1812 and all that stuff was really just like wars of land acquisition and re-enslavement. And so a lot of Gullah Geechee enslaved people would run, instead of running North to the supposedly northern underground railroad, they would firstly run South and they would escape because at the time Georgia was relatively--it wasn't a state, it was relatively an uninhabited and unpopulated besides the Indigenous Americans.

So they would run from the Lowcountry South Carolina region to Florida, to St. Augustine initially because St. Augustine had Fort Mose, which was a Black fort in St. Augustine. So they would run South and then the Spanish, because of the Edict of 1693, when the king chartered basically said that if you run to Florida and you convert to Catholicism and you pledge to serve the Spanish crown against all these foreign invasions, et cetera, et cetera, that they would become free. So essentially it's enslaved people became mercenaries, I mean, if we want to be honest about what they were, because Spanish would just play colonial politics with the British and the United States. So the Black people became mercenaries in Florida, but although they were mercenaries, they did have a certain amount of freedom and agency that came along with it because the Spaniards really couldn't administratively tend to Florida that closely. So they got largely, they were governing themselves almost. So you had a large Black population

around St. Augustine and around Apalachicola Fort Negro area because they would congregate around the forts because that's what the army was, the Black army.

So Fort Negro was one of the forts that I want to say, Andrew Jackson was responsible for destroying. So Haile is doing a documentary film, which kind of traces the history of the maroons in Florida and that was one of the locations that he invited me to come along when he was doing the process. So I got to see the whole documentary process from the back. And I was like, "Dang, this ain't even hard," it just demystified it! I mean, it's hard work, but it's doable. Like anybody could do it if you commit yourself to learning. So ever since then that gave me like the courage to actually pick up the camera and be serious about it. And his son, Merawi Gerima, just last year, he released his debut feature called "Residue," and just learning from him, him allowing me to just kind of be a fly on the wall in that process as well. He invited me to the film fest, just talking to me about the whole process. You know, he let me in with the whole process. We're like really, really, really good friends now because of that. That's how I met Merawi actually at that film location by Fort Negro with his dad. Ever since then, I've just been in that world and I've been documenting a lot seriously in the camera a lot more seriously.

MP: So cool. It's really cool to be able to see that whole process. Would you say it was at Howard that you started engaging in activist work or?

JP: Yeah, I would say 2015 is when--I would say my first political act was in 2015 and I was out there. The murder of Sandra Bland. And in Jacksonville we organized a march around that. That was my first event that I ever organized and the first protest I've ever been to is the one I organized. Well, one of the first ones I've been to was the one I organized. And that was in 2015 so that was the year that I transferred into Howard.

Once I got to Howard, I was involved as well. I was in the NAACP student chapter at Howard, and funny story about that is--you know, Mills, you're lucky you get the inside scoop on these things.

But so basically I was the Political Action Committee Chair for the NAACP Student Chapter at Howard in DC, and the Howard Student Chapter worked very closely with the NAACP National Chapter because of proximity, we were both in DC. We were doing a lot of political work around the election that was Donald Trump's election. And we were doing a lot of work around his appointment of Jeff Sessions, trying to get the appointment overturned, which looking back, it's actually kind of funny because it was kind of naive to even think that that would happen. But yeah, we were doing a lot of work there. So we staged a sit-in and Jeff Sessions' office in the US Senate building, we got arrested, I got arrested with NAACP that time. So we went to jail for a day and then we got out and then around the same time as a lot of this activity was going on, because there was so much going on nationally, of course it affects students.

So there was also another organization that was doing work on campus, which shall remain unnamed. And I was also part of that organization in a lot of the early stages. And we would do things like we disrupted some formal events out of dissent, it was nothing like malicious. It was political dissent. And essentially, the NAACP, their politics didn't align with some of the more radical stuff that we were doing on campus. So, um, I'm just going to say that I was forced to resign from the NAACP, but I continued the activities on campus with the other organization. Yeah, so, I mean, that's--as well as I was doing some community organizing with PACA up in DC, which is Pan-African Community Action. So I was doing some work with them as well as that's when I got

involved with doing work around Cuba solidarity and to end the economic blockade against Cuba, to normalize travel relations between US and Cuba and to end the United States occupation of Guantanamo Bay, which is in Eastern Cuba as well.

MP: And you were able to go to Cuba too.

JP: Yeah. So that was when I--2017, I believe is when I went to Cuba. So Howard was, even before Cuba, Howard was the reason that I traveled out of the country for the first time. I went to South Africa. Yeah, 2016. I went to South Africa on a trip, a student trip, which changed my life. That's when I started documenting my trip, not really intentionally documenting it, just taking pictures type of thing. But now that I look back on it, it was actually documentation. I kind of organically--it's kind of like weird, like you can intentionally do things and then you can accidentally do things and they turn out just as good. And that's kind of how that went because I was just authentically documenting it. So that kind of was a catalyst as well for my documenting things. But I went to South Africa for two weeks. We got to visit Johannesburg, the townships, Alexandria township, Soweto, where Nelson Mandela was from, his house. We visited Pretoria, which is one of the capitals. Because I think if I remember correctly, South Africa has three capitals or three administrative cities, Pretoria, Johannesburg, and Cape Town, and so we visited Cape Town as well. And that was an amazing trip. We got to connect with a lot of different people all over the continent.

Then I went to Haiti, 2017 for spring break with Howard as well, student trip. That was amazing. Life-changing. We stayed there for a week. We stayed right outside of Port-au-Prince, which is the capital, in a small city that escapes my brain right now. But anyways, we stayed there and it was amazing because we stayed at sort of this

compound, which was right in the community. So we got to interact with community folks. We would help them, we were helping them build things, we were helping them cook and clean and everything. So that was cool. We went to the Citadelle in Haiti, which is, if I remember correctly, one of the largest fortresses in the world. It's in Cap-Haïtien and it's built at the top of a mountain. To this day, I don't think historians really know exactly how Black folks in Haiti constructed this ginormous castle on the top of the mountain. But that was like ground zero for like Haitian resistance whenever they got free and the United States, Spain, and the French were trying to reconquer them. So I got to go there and that was like a really good experience because Haiti, for Black people, it's like really important because they were the first nation to rebel against slavery, successfully rebel against and overthrow slavery. So Haiti has a huge symbolic meaning to a lot of the work we do.

MP: That's great. Tell me a little bit about either the community work or just the work you're doing after college.

JP: So in 2017 in Jacksonville--after I graduated Howard in 2017? Maybe 2018.

MP: Who knows.

JP: Who knows.

MP: Time.

JP: A few years ago. I graduated from Howard I think 2018, 2017 actually and I came back to Jacksonville because I taught for two years. During that time, me and some other friends, colleagues, and peers co-founded a group called the Jacksonville Community Action Committee. What that was is basically a group that, it was a Black-led grassroots organization and what we really were focusing

on is what we call police crimes, which is just what it sounds like: crimes that police commit against civilians. The way the law and language is set up those two terms aren't usually put together. Police, crime. But we like to say police crime to psychologically let people know that just because police quote unquote enforce the law doesn't mean that they can't break the law and doesn't mean that they don't commit crimes as well.

A lot of our work started off centering victims and survivors of police brutality and other racialized crimes. And it just grew from there. From 2017 to now, the Jacksonville Community Action Committee, I would say probably one of the national or regional leader for the movement, I would say. We had a lot of success organizing in Jacksonville and I moved to Charleston because I came here for school for other family endeavors. The issues are basically the same everywhere. They're the same here. So we decided to co-found a similar group here that basically has the same mission, which is the Lowcountry Action Committee, hence the similar names. We're basically doing the same thing, but we've been doing a lot of mutual aid as outreach so we do a lot of work on the East Side.

We're trying to expand, but right now we're concentrating mostly on the East Side and fighting for a concept we call, which was introduced in like '69 by the Black Panther Party called community control of the police. And that's what they're struggling for in Jacksonville, all across the nation really. Chicago, Minneapolis, Milwaukee, New York, DC, Tampa, Tallahassee, Jacksonville, Charleston, St. Louis, Salt Lake City, Utah, LA. So it is a movement, all over. We

decided to--I don't want to say bring that to Charleston because that was already happening. Like that movement was already here in Charleston, but we decided to start an organization and contribute to that movement. So that's, that's kinda how we got here and we got our organization started here in Charleston because of those reasons.

MP: Do you want to talk a little bit more, describe a little more, some of the other groups or some of the movement that was already here in Charleston before you got here?

JP: Yeah. When I got here in 2019, Charleston was in a very difficult place. Because since 2015, obviously there has been so many tragedies from the Emanuel Massacre that happened at Emanuel AME to Walter Scott case to other hate crimes and racism and police brutality and the whole nine yards. So there was a lot of that. There was a lot of energy in Charleston since 2015, but a leader of the movement was murdered, Muhiyidin El Amin Moya [Muhiyidin D'Baha], he was murdered in New Orleans. He was such a central part of the movement, what was happening in Charleston. He had his hands in everything and he was an advisor for so many other organizations and movement leaders. And when he was murdered, that kind of just punched Charleston in the gut. There was a lot of confusion. There was a lot of people going in a lot of different directions. There wasn't much communication or cohesion. And on top of that, we had the national uprisings.

So I know it was a lot going on in Charleston and it was so many people in so many places doing so many things. We understood, as our organization, that history goes

in waves. There are moments like this, that everybody is politically aware or politically heightened because of what's going on nationally so like you have a lot of energy. And we knew that that doesn't last forever, those are only moments. So we didn't really, as an organization, what we call LAC, Lowcountry Action Committee, we didn't want to just insert ourselves like that. We opted to kind of build our organization, our infrastructure so that we could do tangible things, sustainable and tangible things like mutual aid and outreach so that we can continue to start pushing these political agendas, but it won't be coming out of a place, like thin air. Because you have to get to know your community. You can't just start making demands and nobody knows who you are, and then you're trying to speak on behalf of people. And we don't speak on behalf of people. We try to organize people to speak in their own interests, we try to give them the tools to do that.

And food is a weapon. People use food to starve people. If you can't, if you have to search for your next meal, then you're not really going to be thinking about the next political move because your basic level of needs are not being met. So we decided to try to build relationships with our community by trying to meet those very, very basic needs, which is food and accessibility to certain things like the vaccine, which we've organized around as well. All those different disparities, because we use the Avery disparities report to formulate a lot of our programs. There's so many racial disparities in Charleston and we just decided to go with, start with food. And that was our vehicle to start building our organization and community so that when we really gear up and start demanding those things like community control of the police and the people's budget and things like that, that we will have support from the community that would benefit the most from those types of initiatives.

MP: I have a couple of questions. I think I should have asked you this much earlier, just in your own words to define mutual aid and what that means to you and what that looks like. Kind of broad.

JP: No, it's fine. So to us, mutual aid, it's a concept and a practice that has a long history. We call it mutual aid today but to us mutual aid is just how we've survived for the last four hundred years here. People like to associate giving food with charity and we're not a charitable organization and we don't do charity. We think that food is a human right. So we organize our communities to be able to feed them and sustain themselves. So with our mutual aid programs, it's not like us just handing out food on the street to random people. These are people that we've built relationships with through other organizations, grassroots organizations in the city, like ECDC, which is on the East Side down the street from here, Eastside Community Development Corporation, which is a staple on the East Side. And we partnered with them to do our mutual aid efforts, so Ms. Latonya Gamble is like central in the East Side. Everybody knows her, she's a titan over here. So we partnered with her and she has access to a lot of the community members that we serve so they trust her and that's how we put how we got our food program going. We supply the food and everything is done through volunteer efforts. We assemble the food; we purchase the food through donations and support. We assemble it, usually at the Avery Research Center, we assemble our bags and then we take those bags to the East Side ECDC office, and that's where people come and pick them up. So it's not, I mean, yes, of course random people are welcome, but these aren't random people that we're serving. These are people that are in community with us and in other organizations. So mutual aid, we like to think of it as like solidarity, more so than like a charitable act. We

don't even like to trick ourselves into thinking that we can solve hunger or we can solve-- like we can't solve. We don't have billions of dollars. Until we have an entirely different economic system, that's really the only way to solve these issues. But we understand, like we learn from the Black Panther Party, that what they call survival pending revolution. Like you have to feed people, you have to clothe people, you have to educate people, people have to sustain themselves so that they can fight for their own rights. And that's kinda where we are in our take on mutual aid and what it means to our organization.

MP: So food is very central at the moment, the bags that y'all are assembling. I think I saw somewhere on trolling through the website, you've included other stuff too? And you had a, yesterday, right? You had a distribution yesterday? What else do y'all--

JP: Yesterday, yup, on Saturday. Yesterday. Usually, a normal bag would consist of leafy greens and vegetables from Fields Farm on Johns Island, which is one of the only Black-operated farms left in the Lowcountry. So we get our leafy greens and our vegetables and produce from Fields Farm. So usually they have some greens in the bag, as well as hardy staples, things that can get you through the week: rice, beans, pasta, bread, and little things like if you have kids or like gotta go to work and eat like Nutri-Grain bars, things like that. That's usually what our bags consist of.

But we also started doing--we have a month-long program events that we're doing for next month. And one of it includes an heirs property workshop on the East Side, because most these houses--East Side is a Black neighborhood, historically Black neighborhood, and a lot of the houses here, they're heirs property, which means that they're collectively owned by the entire family. They usually have been purchased a long time ago by grandparents or great-grandparents and usually they don't have a clear title or clear deed

to the property. So then once the person who purchased the property, once they are deceased, the property then automatically defaults to being heirs property, which means it belongs equally to all the kids unless otherwise stated in a deed or anything. But as default, it becomes collectively owned by all the kids, which are the heirs of the property, hence the heirs property name.

But heirs property is like, it's a gift and a curse because in some instances, heirs property has made it more difficult for members to sell their property. It has historically forced families to keep the land and to live on the land. But it's also a curse because it's a legal and logistical headache. If you do want to like build on it or there might be intra-familial conflicts or whatever, and then one person can force to sell, they can make the property or the state, I think the courts would force the property to be sold. So there's a lot of loopholes and it's not a very--it's a double-edged sword. But I would say it's more bad than good because it's allowed so many people to lose their property simply because they couldn't afford the taxes, it's a logistical nightmare to pay the taxes, so many family members own it that you become lost in the sauce, you don't know what's what, and conflicts happen. And then that's prime, conflicts are prime for people coming in and forcing you to sell, or they'll throw some money at you. And historically, of course, we've been strapped for money, so people will sell their property. And you know, it sucks.

That's what we've been dealing with on Sol Legare Island. Sol Legare Island was almost completely Black-owned at one point, all farmers and fishermen, but now you see property signs going up and there'll be sold, they're sold in days. People make offers, people ride through Sol Legare every day, looking for those property signs to go up. So that's what we're battling right now. Most people think of heirs property, they think of

rural land because that's what most people associate Gullah Geechee people with is rural country. But we have to understand the East Side, which is urban, historically has been urban, they also have heirs property and they're also Gullah Geechee they also are facing the same thing.

MP: Yeah, those targets for gentrification, it feels like it's linked right there.

How'd y'all get involved with East Side specifically?

JP: I got to introduced to Ms. Latonya [Gamble] at a Thanksgiving food drive at Martin Park. I'm sorry, not Martin Park, it was actually Philip Simmons Park. Wait. I think it was Martin Park. I forgot.

MP: With the pool?

JP: No, it was definitely Philip Simmons Park. Yeah, Philip Simmons Park. So I got involved--actually, Marcus introduced me to Ms. Latonya and I think from that moment on, we knew that we had a food program that we were trying to start, and we knew that it would not have been effective if we just posted up on--because we did that at first. Our first food drive, our very first food drive was on America Street right across from East Side Soul Food right down the street from here. And we just posted up on the sidewalk at the corner of America Street and we gave out bags of food and literature to people, random at that time, random people.

It wasn't until one of the elders, in a very principled way, criticized us and basically said that we could be a lot more effective if we partnered with such and such, which happened to turn into ECDC [Eastside Community Development Corporation]. We didn't exactly know who at the time, but it all makes sense with ECDC because they were only a few blocks down. So the next drive, we came back as an organization and we thought it over

and thought about how to improve and how to be more effective and to take that community feedback. So then we were like, okay, would it be a good idea to try to partner with ECDC? Because they already did a food program where they would take hot meals to some of the elders that may not be able to get out or because of COVID they didn't want to come out. So they were doing food deliveries and things like that because that's the nature of their organization. That's how they support the East Side as well as a lot of other different ways, but that's one of the ways. And we were like, "Well, how about next time we partner up and y'all have hot food and we can bring the groceries and then as you're getting the hot food, you got a bag of groceries to go with it." And Ms. Latonya was like, "Yeah, that sounds great," and we've been doing it every month ever since. And we've upped our production. I think our first drive we gave out about fifty bags and I think now we're hitting about a hundred bags every month. So yeah, we've upped our operation.

MP: Wow, that's amazing. So you work with ECDC. Do you work a lot with any other organizations, whether organizations like that or other mutual aid groups or activists, whether they're individuals or groups?

JP: We're also a founding members of the People's Budget Coalition, which is a coalition between several grassroots organizations here in the Lowcountry, which includes Black Lives Matter Charleston, ACLU, there's some other people whose names are escaping me right now.

MP: I've got the list somewhere, I've got you.

JP: There's a lot of people in the coalition. So we're founding members of the coalition--DSA and some other folks--and we decided to come together because we were

trying to make sense of this huge political moment that we just had. And like I said before, we knew that it would pass and that people would go back to normal life, as normal as you want to say it is right now. But we knew that either way, that moment would pass and we didn't want the moment to happen then it pass and then nothing came of it. So we decided to formulate this coalition and this is how we decided that we were going to organize for people's budget through that coalition. Basically people's budget is-- we're still formulating the exact demand of what it would be, but in general, it's being introduced around the nation in different cities.

And the general idea of it is that we want to take money from the police budget, which across the whole nation is the most funded department in most cities I would argue. Basically every city, the police department is going to be the most funded department there is. And we thought that it wasn't fair that police basically--CPD for instance, gets about 26 percent of the whole budget, yet you're giving like one percent of the budget to important things that actually affect people's lives and improve quality of life. And we thought that that was just an equitable way to have the budget. And it ignores the racist history of policing, especially in Charleston, the slavery capital of North America, where modern day police departments derived from the slave catchers that were here. We thought that it was just a racist way to deal with social issues, the very real social issues that are in the Black community. We feel that the police can't solve those issues and they never have and they never intended to, historically. So why should they get a fourth of the budget and why should they be the ones who society relies upon to quote unquote solve crime and the social issues when crime, quote unquote crime, and the social issues are essentially a by-product of the fact that these communities are being

starved and they don't have any resources and you're sending all our resources to the police department.

The city at the same time, it creates the disparities and then it tries to solve the disparities that it created through a violent institution. So we feel that especially when people have guns, that they should be under the direct control of the people who live in the communities which they patrol, like they're on a tour of duty because they don't even live in the communities that they patrol. We know that community control is the next logical step toward abolition or whatever it is that one believes. But the first step is to actually have control over the institution, and that institution right now, I think the most pressing institution to have control over, especially for Black and poor people, working people, is police departments.

MP: Yeah, that's incredible. That essentially sums up my entire thesis, makes it easy.

JP: Really?

MP: Yeah, that's great! I guess maybe if you could talk a little bit, maybe some of your observations when you've been working in the East Side. Have you seen any interactions between the police and the community? Have you seen any instances of that?

JP: Well, besides the fact that it's heavily policed.

MP: Mhm, like every couple of minutes.

JP: Every few minutes, you see patrols patrolling the East Side and harassing. Culturally, there's obviously a difference between how Black people live and how white people live. Whether people want to recognize this or acknowledge this is up to them, but just because we share the same land mass for five hundred years, doesn't mean that we

share the same culture for five hundred years. We have separate routes of development for obvious reasons because of the relationship that Black people had to the land and to white people as captives and as enslaved people. So while we may have cooked the food that white people ate and did their laundry and grew their cotton, we didn't necessarily share a culture. That's still an issue with policing because policing is from the perspective of white patriarchal, racist society. Some of the things that we do as Black people are deemed criminal when in fact they're not criminal, they're just the way that we live. Like what they call loitering is Black people, their idea of private property is not the same. We view property very publicly so you will see large congregations of people hanging out because that's just what we do. But the police and society criminalizes that because it goes, all this goes back to slavery. Black people couldn't congregate in groups larger than what? Three or four people? Especially in Charleston.

MP: Especially in the East Side.

JP: Especially in the East Side. So all of this ties back to a greater history. And the average person might not notice the very subtle things like that in society with policing, they think that, "Oh, police are coming to clean up the neighborhood and more police, oh yeah, that's going to solve crime and fight crime," when in reality it's more police ever. Police are more funded than they've ever been in history yet crime still exists. So it's like, obviously, what is that? When you try to do the same thing over and over again, what is that called? Insanity? They're doing the same, the city isn't even creative, not even just Charleston, this is just in general, like cities across the nation, they're not creative when it comes to trying to solve the issues. They just throw money at the police and think that's going to make the things disappear, the things that they don't like disappear, rather than

throwing money at job training programs, throwing money at housing programs, throwing money at educational programs, throwing money at building parks, recreation, whatever, after school, juvenile kid programs, whatever. Instead of throwing money at that, they throw money at the police. And they expect the police to solve mental health crises. When people are having breakdowns, they expect the police to solve everything; every societal issue, they expect police to solve. When in reality, they're not equipped to do that. They never were. They never intended to be equipped to do that. And it's time for the United States to reckon with that, that history in our reality.

MP: I think it's great that you're bringing up this really important distinction between crime and perceptions of crime and how you're saying there's these inherently different cultural experiences that white Americans and Black Americans have, which we see in policing, but I feel like we're also seeing--because of gentrification, more and more often, and some tensions there in the East Side, just the level of gentrification that's happening. Have you seen some of those same cultural tensions, I guess you could call it, here?

JP: Yeah, like where I'm from, on Sol Legare Island for instance, one of my cousins told me that a white family moved in next to them on some property that that was sold. It was formerly Black property and was sold to some white people. And those people had like a pirate flag in their yard. And it's just like these types of nuances. Like you know the history of--I mean, you might not know the history of Sol Legare, but you know this is a Black community. It's not rocket science, it's not rocket science. But you do these small things, like a pirate flag in the Black community, knowing the connotation that sets. My cousin basically said they've confronted them several times and I think

they've taken the pirate flag down now, but those type of what the young folks call the day, microaggressions, those type of things, that's going to happen when you have this cultural collision and you have people that come in and they're not used to living as equals with people. They're used to coming in and bogarting their way.

For instance, on Sol Legare where Mosquito Beach is, which was a historic Black beach on Sol Legare, my uncle told me that it was a white woman who lives on Sol Legare trying so desperately to get Mosquito Beach shut down so that they can buy the property. They petitioned the city, they brought this thick file of records to the judge from like 1950 of like all the things that have happened, trying to get it shut down so that they can come through and purchase our property. So things like that, like if you're not in the know, you're not going to know. It's almost shadow work being done because they do it behind closed doors. And luckily on Sol Legare, Mosquito Beach Association is very strong and I highly doubt that would ever happen in my lifetime because that's how dedicated they are to preserving Mosquito Beach, which has just been deemed a historic site. So I highly doubt that would happen, but it just shows you to the extent that the people will go to do that.

And also at the end of Sol Legare, there's a boat landing where a lot of white people do live. I would say that's the white section of Sol Legare, all the way at the end near the Stono River. There's like Trump flags and blue lives matter flags. It's like, you know you're in a Black community, you can see what's going on nationally, and you choose to antagonize with these types of symbolism. I spoke to some of my family members and they don't have an issue with living with white people. It's if you're coming to live with us and you're participating our community as an equal, as a community

member, and not as a colonizer, as somebody who's coming to try to take over. That's the crux of the issue. She told me that story, she was like, it's only like one white person on Sol Legare that actually attends the programs and attempts to be a part of the community. But everyone else, they view themselves as a separate aggregate of Sol Legare and they've even like--another example on Sol Legare: there was no fences or gated communities, but they purchased some land and they carved out a little space and built a gated community.

MP: They're just completely changing--

JP: Completely changed the landscape. And they fought hard because they didn't want gated communities in Sol Legare because gated community, that's isolation. You're isolating yourself at that point. Like, why don't you want to live with the people? They buy land, historical routes that people on Sol Legare took, roads that have been paved and things like that since way before my grandparents or great-grandparents. They'll buy the property and they'll put a gate on the road so now we can't access the roads that we have historically accessed because they bought a property and they privatized it in that way. So it's things like that, where people think that gentrification, it's like, "Oh, it's a race issue. They don't want to live with white people, blah, blah, blah." But it's really that we know what comes when we see an influx of white, especially middle class white, we know what's going to happen. History has told us, we've seen it with our own eyes. So those are the types of things, those types of aggressions that come with gentrification.

MP: Like you're saying, colonialism. Not living with, but living on top of almost. I feel like that's pretty evident in the East Side too. Fences go up here a

lot, like on the daily. And it does feel like, you might be walking on the sidewalk with someone, but you're not walking with them at all. Think you see that here a lot too. I was going somewhere with that, I'm sorry.

JP: You're fine.

MP: Oh gosh. I completely forgot where my train of thought was.

JP: The good thing about video recording is you can edit.

MP: Yeah, that's fantastic. we should switch to video. I guess we've talked about police, we've talked about gentrification. How have you seen those two overlap? Whether here, elsewhere, where you grow up, on Sol Legare? In DC even?

JP: DC--oh my god. I don't even want to talk about DC.

MP: No, yeah, you don't--

JP: It's breakneck speed. Like Charleston is actually on--I feel like Charleston is now probably on pace with the rapid speed that it's being gentrified. But gentrification, the police, they go hand in hand because just like colonialism where you need when you have settlers coming in, you have to have a military force to secure the settlers. And these are the correlations. Gentrification is not simply white people or rich people or middle-class people moving to poor locations. It's poor or urban or nonwhite locations. They are coming and they are coming as agents of white supremacy half the time. Because they know that--it almost becomes a frontier. They think of themselves as like pioneers or frontier people because they penetrated this neighborhood that everybody's scared to go to cause it's Black--this is their thinking.

Like, you know, no, they're pioneer--"I'm a pioneer. I came here and I bought my house for \$10,000 and I built it up and I'm the only white person on my block. And a year later it's five of us. Two years later, the whole block is gone. And now we're demanding a Starbucks where Mr. Such and Such has had his corner store, his mom's or grandma's corner store for sixty years. We want to Starbucks. So we're going to try to get the city to rezone this and turn it into a Starbucks," which is an issue that's happening on the East Side, which is why I alluded to that. So things like that, where you come in and they want to make the East Side--they want to make America Street, I think America and Columbus, they want to make that the gateway to the East Side is what I've been hearing. Word on the street is that's what gentrifiers want. So they want this to become a gateway to the East Side. And of course, with every single gentrification, gentrified community, their Starbucks is the, that's like the flag post. That's the flag post, you know? So they wanted a Starbucks over here.

MP: On America, Columbus?

JP: Word on the street.

MP: Ahh, oh no!

JP: I can't confirm nor deny, but that's the word on the street.

MP: That's information though, wow.

JP: So imagine a Starbucks smack dab in the middle of, the heart of the East Side. That doesn't even add up.

MP: So just changing the social and the physical fabric completely.

JP: I mean, and this probably sounds ridiculous, but growing up, Starbucks is not an inviting location for Black people. Like I didn't start going to Starbucks until I went to college. But most don't go to Starbucks because it's always been a barrier. No offense to Starbucks, but that's just how it's been seen. And the fact that Starbucks kind of represents that, it's kind of collectively understood that once you see the Starbucks go up, you already know what's about to happen. It's almost like a church. Back during colonialism, Starbucks is almost like a church. Like when you see that church go up, this is a brick and mortar, this is a space of organization, and Starbucks is like literally the new church when it comes to colonialism and gentrification.

MP: That's exactly right. That's a good comparison. But it's insane that gentrifiers, that invaders are demanding a Starbucks when the East Side is still a food desert, when there's no access to--

JP: No grocery stores.

MP: Yeah, no grocery store, no way to get like healthy, non-preservative food.

JP: Corner store food that they keep at the corner store.

MP: I mean, it's food. It's ramen. I go to the corner store.

JP: Yeah. And I've lived that life. It sucks because you can feel the difference, eating a healthy meal versus eating the food from a corner store, like chips and ramen. You can feel the difference. People who survive off that type of food, it has an effect on your health and it has an effect on your psyche and it has an effect on how you perform in school. And it has an effect on all this stuff. It's all linked to food and access to food. And once this community becomes--hopefully it doesn't--but once it does become more white, of course there's going to be a grocery store. There's going to be a Whole Foods or

whatever, probably it's some abandoned building that they're going to turn it into some type of Fresh Foods. And that's what it is. You see that the city and corporations in America, they're able to do it, it's just they only do it for a certain people. And it takes certain people to move out for them to bring in stuff that people need to survive.

Gentrification, that heightens, I mean, literally, you see that in real time when you see gentrification happening in neighborhoods that have been food deserts for decades. But then once a certain population gets there, now it becomes an oasis with abundance or whatever.

MP: The Lowcountry Action Committee, have y'all take any steps or thought, put words on paper about trying to mitigate or maybe fight gentrification here? That's a huge beast to tackle.

JP: Yeah, exactly. So it's like a lot of moving parts because to be honest, Charleston is run by developers. The developers are running the city. They do what they want. They're developing on Johns Island and developing on James Island, Downtown. North Charleston even is starting to become these hubs of development. We have an heirs property clinic on May 13th that's going to be a free clinic for people on the East Side who have heirs property to come there and talk to lawyers about how to preserve their property and how to--because they've been getting a lot of shady pieces of mail. People know that, especially with Black people, when it comes to owning a house, that's such a scary experience because we're so used to it being taken away. So they'll send ambiguous letters to homeowners.

Most of them are elderly and elderly people, when it comes to bills and mail, they take that seriously. So they see a piece of mail come and it's discussing their property.

And they write it in a very ambiguous, mischievous way that the owners may think that there is some type of financial, they might be behind on our house or something. So they offer you money to like, you know, you're going to lose the house anyway way type of thing. They might not explicitly say it, but it's implied through the language. So that's how they get a lot of people to sell their houses, that's one of the tactics that they use. The workshop is just hopefully to provide some education around that and ways for the community to combat that and to continue to keep their property by whatever means they can.

MP: That's great. It sounds like a really valuable--and these are all volunteers helping out?

JP: Yeah. So this is from, I think it's called the Center for Heirs Property, which is over on Sam Rittenberg in West Ashley. It's an event hosted by the Lowcountry Action Committee in partnership with the Avery Research Center, the Center for Heirs Property, and ECDC. And that's on May 30th, but it's also going to be reoccurring. So we're hopefully trying to bring--like this one's for the East Side. Hopefully we can do something over Sol Legare area, North Charleston, on the islands as well. So hopefully this becomes a consistent type of program.

MP: And are all these other places, places y'all want to expand?

JP: Yeah. Essentially we want to definitely--see Charleston, or I should say Charleston County or the Charleston area is like a logistical nightmare when it comes to municipalities. Because you have Charleston County and then you have the city of Charleston proper, and then you have North Charleston and then you have West Ashley and then you have Folly Beach, the town of James Island, Johns Island, you have Mount

Pleasant. So all of these different municipalities have their own police departments, or most of them do, as under the jurisdiction of Charleston County Sheriff Department, as well as obviously people may live in North Charleston, but they work downtown or vice versa or with the islands as well. So like everybody in Charleston is connected, but you have these separate municipalities. So if you're trying to run a campaign or do certain things or target a certain legislation or community, it becomes very hard because it's been carved up, Charleston has been carved up in such a complex way.

I say that to say, yes, we want to expand. But right now we're really trying to focus on Charleston because we feel like Charleston obviously is the economic center, political and economic center of the whole county in general. So if you can build a movement in Charleston that addresses these issues, then it can easily be replicated in North Charleston. Or vice versa! We never know. I hate to go full history nerd, but they thought that the first communist revolution was going to happen in an industrial center in Europe, like Germany or England, but it happened in Russia. Because Russia was almost basically an agrarian society. So I say that to say, we may think that Charleston is it, but it might be North Charleston. So, I mean, we don't know, but we chose Charleston because it's the most visible, it has the largest budget and, historically it's the economic center here. We feel like if the movement is built here, then it's definitely going to grow to surrounding areas and we're going to be able to collaborate with people and make it happen that way versus trying to-- because issues, when you try to--there's a saying that goes like, if you chase two rabbits, you'll get none. You can't do it all at once. It's so hard for activists to commit to a certain issue because we want to do it all, but you just simply can't, that's not possible. So we've decided as of now that we're going to--I mean,

obviously we're going to be in community, collaborate with anybody, North Charleston, especially North Charleston because we're already a community with North Charleston. A lot of our people live in North Charleston, members as well. But as far as politically, we're really trying to focus on the city of Charleston to make some headway and then we can build those relationships with those other organizations that's doing the work in the other areas of the Charleston area.

MP: I feel like there's so many different groups too, so that's fantastic. How many people are working for Lowcountry Action Committee right now?

JP: We have like core members; I would say it's about eight to ten core members. And we also have volunteers and partners and collaborators. But as far as Lowcountry Action Committee, it's about eight to ten people, dedicated, committed people that make that organization work.

MP: Y'all do so much with so few people.

JP: I know. It's like never-ending.

MP: Yeah. Well, on that note, I don't want to take up any more of your time.

JP: Oh no!

MP: I wanna ask, I guess what you envision for the East Side, for your group, for Charleston, for the Lowcountry. Positive or negative.

JP: Well, if I'm being optimistic, I would envision--Charleston, obviously it's symbolic for so many things because it was ground zero for enslavement in North America. I feel like if Charleston can, if we can build a movement in Charleston that really addresses the root causes of the plight of so many people, be it Black people, be it working-class people, then that could be duplicated almost anywhere. Especially in the

South. Hopefully, I feel pretty optimistic about us building a unified movement in that sense, that could really take the, which is almost like a tyrannical amount of power from the police department and the city, and redistribute it into the hands of people in the communities that are most affected. And, in doing that, I feel like Charleston has to really address the issue of slavery because it's so prominent in their history and everything in the city and the surrounding area is a by-product of slavery and colonialism, whether it be Indigenous Americans that lived here before Europeans arrived and before Africans were enslaved here, or whether it be the era where Africans were enslaved and whether it be after that, during Jim Crow, Reconstruction, and to the current day.

You know, these issues have just been simmering for decades and hundreds of years. And I feel like if Charleston can make that breakthrough and there's a successful campaign for people's budget and community control and just a complete restructuring of not only Charleston, but the United States, that's my optimistic outcome. Who knows when that'll happen, hopefully it's in my lifetime, who knows. But more realistically, I feel like we have a big battle ahead of us when it comes to these types of things. Because the city, the structures, the power right now, they have so much money and power and influence that the things that we have to organize and put so much effort into do, to accomplish, such as a food drive once a month, they have the money and resources to change the narrative, to co-opt a lot of work that's been done. They have the power to try to stop the work even, if it gets to a point where it's becoming too much of a nuisance to the image of the city, as a tourist, as a Confederate Disneyland. They just have so much money and resources and power and I feel like Charleston community is definitely a

community that's been fighting since its existence of being here: enslaved people and their descendants.

But people are tired. When you fight for four hundred years, you get beat down and you can tell, like some people are just--there's some sentiment where it's just like some people just go along to get along type of thing where they're just tired, you know? But you got some people who are still willing to fight. So, how do you make contact with those people that, and channel that in the most productive way. And I think that we've been doing that through our organization, through programs. If we continue to do that, I feel like it's a very long, arduous task and struggle, but I do think that it is possible because I wouldn't be doing it if I didn't believe that there was a possibility of winning, I would be kind of insane to be doing this. Because it's like why would you even do it if you didn't think it was possible? So I can't say that I don't think it's possible because that would mean that I don't believe that it's possible to change our conditions. And that would mean that I am a defeatist. That means I'm defeated and I think that that would be me agreeing to history, a whole history of racism that said that this is the way it is because you're inferior versus it doesn't have to be this way. People have the ability to change it. So yeah, that that's my optimistic and my realistic outcomes, or expected outcomes.

MP: Well, I'm so excited to see what you, as an individual, keep doing and what you keep doing with all the work that you're engaged with, but unless you have any final thoughts, feelings?

JP: I'm happy that, you know, I appreciate you for doing this oral history interview. I think that the more we work, the more the message could be spread around,

and the more people that are interested in getting involved, I think the better. So I'm always willing to talk to anybody about ideas and about our vision and trying to incorporate as many people as possible to make that happen. So, yeah, thank you for the interview and if you need anything just let me know.

MP: Yeah, thanks, Joshua! I'm going to Let's figure it out. Um, technology is hard. Oh, no.

End of recording.

Transcription by Mills Pennebaker

MLL 7/29/21