

TRANSCRIPT – RAYNIQUE SYAS

Interviewee: RAYNIQUE SYAS

Interviewer: GRACE ANN HALL

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GRACE HALL: Let's see, there we go. All right. We are live. So, I guess just to get started, if you'd like to tell me your full name, as well as when and where you were born.

RAYNIQUE SYAS: My name is Raynique Syas, and I was born in Los Angeles California.

GH: Thank you.

RS: Oh, and June 15, 1985.

GH: All right. Thank you. So what was, what was the life like in California growing up? Can you tell me a little bit about your family? If That's okay.

RS: Yeah, so I grew up in a small, a smaller part of Los Angeles called Watts. I grew up in a housing project. My mom and my dad were both natives of that area. It was (laughs) it is, it was a very urban area typical of Los Angeles in the eighties, city gangs and things like that. Typical city housing project life, where you had like gangs, drugs that kind of activity. But it was really a community-based neighborhood for me. Cause I grew up in it. And all my family was there and it was all I knew.

Like, that was really the big, it was just for me growing up. It was, I think for other people looking in, it might be like a really scary environment, but for me it was

really normal. It was normal to play in that type of environment and to make our own toys and to just make our own fun.

GH: Did you, I guess, did your experiences as a child, did they motivate you towards activism in adulthood, is that kind of what pushed you?

RS: Most definitely. I think a lot of the things that I saw that a lot of my first experiences were what I now categorize as injustice. It's probably more out of my childhood. Just looking at the level of poverty that we lived in that we normalized--.

You know, just living. My mom was 13 when she had me and 17 when she had her own place there. And in those housing projects of course were for low-income families who typically lived with like on, on some type of dependency to the state, like whether it was food stamps or whatever. So, just looking at like how our, how our community dealt with folks that were dependent upon the state was something that I saw as an injustice, because we was like, basically treated like, we didn't mean anything to nobody but ourselves. So, we had to form this like community of us. And then like seeing how poverty, in fact, impacted everybody's family and the necessity for the drug use and the drug selling in the community. So drugs, people got addicted to drugs, but people also had to sell drugs. If that makes sense, like you had to sell drugs in order to survive, but you also like (00:04:27) had people who were in your family who were addicted to drugs. And like you knew that this was something that was unsafe and unhealthy for your family, but what other choice did you have because it was either that or not make your rent and then y'all don't have a place to stay or not, you know, be able to, you know, provide for your family because a welfare check for two or for a family of three is five hundred and something dollars. And even less back in the eighties, you know what I

mean? So it was like, you gotta do what you gotta do to survive. So, and a lot of it was just do what you gotta do. It did it impact my, my views on the justice system. And it impacts my views on survival and what it takes to actually, to actually survive and to actually live, here or anywhere.

GH: So what made you decide to leave Los Angeles?

RS: A number of different things. I--. There was a lot of--, I don't have a lot of people from my--, that survived my childhood either because they were killed, went to prison or they died because of something else, some drug overdose or some, just something happened to where I don't have a lot of friends that, and I'm, and I'm just 35. So I don't have a lot of friends that I grew up with, especially not my male friends. I have children and I, the lifestyle that I grew up in, it's really something that like, you can really get carried away into, like it, because it's all around you is something that I don't know how to describe it because it's just like, you grow up knowing how to gang bang before you know how to talk, you grow up knowing how to, you know, like this lifestyle is just something, it's all, it's all around you and you know how to do it before, you know how to do anything else, you know, how to survive this before you know how to live any other type of life, if that makes sense. So I think I just wanted to give my kids something different and like a different opportunity to be able to like, you know, really choose who they wanted to be instead of growing up and being from this area and just recognize it and being recognized as a person that was from this area before they can even have an opportunity to decide that that's what they wanted their identity to be.

And I also just wanting something different for myself wanting to see if these survival skills worked everywhere else, really. And then I wanted to do it in a place

where I have the security of having more family. Having, known somebody. You don't ever want to go somewhere where it's so unfamiliar. Like you don't know anybody's names. That's just a myth that you want to go somewhere where nobody knows your name, you don't ever want to do that. You always want to be familiar with somebody. So this was a place. Charleston was a place where I had family. My family that I had grown up with, with family that I had, that was related to me by blood. So why not? What you got to lose? You not doing nothing else? And also because a lot of it had to do with my life circumstances. Not that it was particularly bad, but my kid's father, my son, I had just had a son. I have two daughters and one son and my son was maybe one when my fiancé was sentenced to 19 and a half years in prison. You don't really want to raise a son in LA by yourself.

I wanted to give him a different opportunity. I wanted to give particularly him another opportunity.

GH: So how did you survive? How did you, I guess, keep on going to escape it until you were able to leave?

RS: I think I'm very blessed in the sense of like who I have. I have strong people around me. Always have like, I'm very blessed in the sense that I've I think it has, it has a lot to do with like I have my mother and my mother's mother and my mother's mother's mother and I got it. I got to experience like the older people in my life. I've lived-- I've been alive when to see to be a fifth generation and to see five generations of my family. I think that had a lot to do with like just them imparting wisdom to me and like sitting with them and having conversation with them about, you know, who I want to be and who I ought to be. And like what type of things are right. And what type of things are wrong.

I don't think a lot of people just get to experience that for one. So, I think I was very wealthy in, in that like both sides of my--. And I a lot of friends didn't have like the advantage of always having, you know, both of their parents, you know, to have conversations about and get different kinds of perspectives, not to say that they were always right. My mom was 13, my dad was 17, but just the advantage to have somebody who was older than you and had more experience than you and the wherewithal to like, know what to do with that. A lot of people just didn't have that and didn't have, didn't have that experience and just having people of faith around me, my family is very faithful. They, you know, there was, I don't think not to say that I just lived around a lot of bad people. I think there was just not enough people around in my environment of people to tell them or to help them, to guide them as to what was right and what was wrong. And I had that. So I think a lot of, and I had the knowledge and the ability for myself to say, to decide that this was right, and this was not to make those decisions. And a lot of people didn't and it was just, it was grace. I was graced in that way. So--.

That's how I survived it, not to say that, I came through without a whole bunch of scars and scratches, but that's the gist of it.

GH: So you grew up in a community of faith or in the church?

RS: Not to say that my family cause I have, like, my grandmother was on drugs for a number of years and like not to say that my family just didn't have trials and tribulations that they went through. Cause we definitely did. And not to say that they were a perfect family, you know, like everything happened, everything happened perfectly, because we lived in that environment and members of my family are gang bangers and they sold drugs and all of those things. But I think being grounded and

rooted in a faith tradition did help. And having that as like a guiding post that you always came back to for us was something that it just, it, it blessed me to be able to, you know, make it through some, I didn't always make the right decisions, but a lot of times I did, you know, and it was because of that.

GH: So once you moved to Charleston what was, well, what was the experience of the move, but were your kids--,

RS: Traumatized.

GH: Old enough to, they were traumatized?

RS: Yeah, (laughs) I think we, we are just now like coming out of the trauma of the move and into like experiencing maybe I wouldn't say it's joy, but it's just like settlement after this is our sixth year here. And the, so first of all, there was the initial, like us moving in with family whom we did not grow up with and like getting to know those persons who were from a place where we knew, they they're all from California, they all grew up in that area. But I think being in Charleston for 30 plus years, they were now like, like they're now Charlestonians. They're no longer like LA people. And so like just the difference culturally of who we are. Even though we're related by blood and that's my family, that's my grandmother, this is my aunt. And this is my uncle.

Like, there's just some cultural differences. And then the fact that this was my paternal family and not my maternal family. And usually when a family separates and children are more close with their maternal family, because that's who they're normally with. And so that was the case here. And then just, I think the feeling that I would describe, or words that I would describe, like our initial introduction to Charleston was just very oppressive. There was this feeling of like, stay in line, shut up and like do what

you're told, which we were just not used to. We just, it just wasn't, it was hard to get used to, like, you're going to do things like everybody else does. And we were just not used to that. We were just not used to this. There's like this I don't know, uniformity that everybody kind of complies to in Charleston.

Like we all walk the same. We all, like everybody do, we eat the same things. We do the same things and your differences. Like, I think here's where I really began to like, understand how I embraced everybody else's cultural differences and their different thought patterns. And I appreciated my love for that. Once I got to Charleston, because my differences were not accepted as much as they were everywhere else. Like not even the shape of my body, the way I wear my hair, the way I talk, the way I dress, the way, you know, all of these things where like you're supposed to be like everybody else. And when I had, I think, whereas in California, I think I, my identity was based in individuality and me being like, I'm the only Raynique that, you know, and you'll never find another one. And then here, it was like, no, but you just like everybody else. And everybody else was just like you. So you just go and fall into line with what everybody else is doing is more simulated than I had ever known. And then I expected, because culturally in California, like I think the diversity amongst people of color and the unity among people of color was very different, it's very different in California. Like, first of all, I see more different types of people of color than just black people. And here I only see black people.

And so that was something to get used to. And just the unity amongst persons of color for me is in Charleston, it's just non-existent. There is no, there's just black and white. And I wasn't used to that. And I also wasn't used to like, in your face racism that

was just like there. And I definitely wasn't used to seeing that, like in your, I knew that I knew of racism, I've experienced racism, but I think here, I experienced it like really in close and live in HD. Like it's in the schools, it's in the water, it's in the, it's in the feeling when you walk into a room. And I had never felt that before, like Charleston is literally separated by black people and white people. Like the streets are separated, the schools are separated, the, everything was like a segregated city. And I was like, what did I walk into? And my children also were like, why would you bring us here? So it was, it was very traumatic.

GH: But you stayed?

RS: Yeah, I did. Cause I'm not no punk. You know, I was also like, that's how my environment grew up, growing up in Watts. It's like, you, ain't just gonna tell me what to do. And if you tell me what to do, like we got a problem. Cause now I have to fight you for that. And I have to, you know what I mean? Like I had like, I'm going to fight for that. Like if I said, I'm here now, so what you going to do about it? Like, if you're going to it's, it's kind of like a make me, you know, you want me to leave, make me, put me out. And that was my whole attitude. Like, if you want me to out, put me out, do something about it. You want, you want me to shut up, shut me up then kind of thing.

So it was just all of the rebellion from what I had, LA is a very even though like, there's like the racism might be a little bit more scaled back. It's a very like aggressive city. So like, as like, I feel like here in Charleston, people are more like, that's this Southern hospitality that cloaks the racism. It's like, you're nice, nasty to people where you're like, Oh yeah, bless your heart and all that. And in LA it's like, what's up, you want to fight? Like, it gives like outwardly like aggressive in here. It's just aggressive, but

I'm a sneaky aggressive, which I couldn't stand. And it just made me more agitated and want to fight back against it more. So, I think I'm just here by a rebellious heart.

Honestly,

GH: The city needs those. Definitely. So is that what pushed you towards the Justice Ministry? Is that how you found them or was there another series of circumstances?

RS: So my family was involved in a, in a very social justice church. I would say it's, it's, it's the most active in social justice that I have witnessed since I, like I said, I grew up with this faith tradition, but I had never saw Christianity in the way that I do now. Whereas Jesus was not just somebody who was just like this soft white feeble person who was just like, Oh, if you hit me, I'm going to turn the other cheek. And I'm going to be like, and this was my first experience with Jesus as a person of power, like real life. Like I always, like, in my mind as a child, he was a person of power as in he could do things and he could make things happen. But like now Jesus is a person of power as in like a human form of power.

Like he, his power was like related to me, if that makes sense. And he, he, wasn't just this omnipotent thing that I couldn't touch. I, and he was like, somebody that I can relate to somebody that hurt and felt hurt and got angry and got mad and just snapped and did stuff about it. Like he got mad at these people. He like literally turned over the tables and was like, what y'all doing. You're not going to act like this. And like, I was like, that's me, but I had never, I had never witnessed that in my faith. Like, because growing up it was just like Jesus said, be calm, Jesus said, you know, be like Jesus and walk away from that thing. And it was always like when I was angry, that was of the devil and that was

like evil and that was bad. And that, that was something you should not do. And I had never learned about like a righteous anger that caused you to react and to make things change. And that's what I saw in the Justice Ministry. I saw people of faith who got angry and were like, you're not going to treat me like this. You're not going to walk all over me. You're not going to walk all over my friends. And they called out people in power. And I was just amazed by that. And then, it was the first time for me in Charleston that I saw the diversity that I saw in California. I saw all different kinds of people, all different kinds of faith traditions. And they were righteously angry and doing something about it. I was like, this is lit. I'm going to do this too. So I wanted parts of that. I was like, even if you don't, even if I don't have to do nothing, whatever I have to do to be a part of this group, this is what I'm gonna do. And I just start, you know, going to whatever meetings that I could go to and just really learning everything that I could learn about what and why.

And it made me see like Dr. King in a different way. It made me see Malcolm X in a different way. It made, you know, it made me see all of these folks who I had looked at through this lens of this, you know, other Jesus, it made me see them in a different light. And maybe cause I was like Dr. King was just all soft. He just didn't want to fight nobody. You know? And then I was like, wow, no, what he did for his time was radical. And what he did was amazing. And I just, you know, it just encouraged me

When I felt injustice to, to react in a different way, because remember I grew up and my reaction was to fight physically. Like we're going to physically fight, but now I could fight you mentally and now I can fight you spiritually. And I can fight you with my words and with my actions and with the power of a multitude of people who felt like me,

you know what I mean? So it was just, it was amazing to me, like it was like a high that I had never gotten before. It was like, how did this happen? So--.

GH: So you didn't, you didn't have to transition really (00:26:02). Did you have to adjust to this new conception of Christianity and of passion and justice?

RS: I think there was a period. Yeah, I do. I think, I do think there was like, and there still is probably some transitioning happening. Because for 30 years I was this person who just, when they got angry, they got angry, you know, and that, and they had all of this other and they just, and, and I think too, like when you're angry in the physical way, you're not processing it. It's not being worked out. And it was never being thought about like, why, why is this doing this? What is causing these feelings? So this new process of like trying to be like, Jesus, I think it was like, why do I think like this? Why do I want this? Why am I angry at this? Why am I feeling this? What do I want to do with this? How do I want to harness this power? What, what is the next step to this? It was very, it is very thoughtful and planned out. It's not like just outrage of, it which is what I think when you grow up in that environment, you feel you, because you see your cousin being killed in front of you and you can't do anything about it. And you just have like a rage balled up. And so you just walking around with aggression, that's not being expressed. And this was like expressing that aggression in a positive way, I think.

But it is a transition to answer your question and it, and I think it's just, I think it's something that will be ongoing. Like this is not like it doesn't, it's just always going to be this process of like the next transitioning to something different. Every, lifelong, when they say you like learning something all your life, this is that, that process. If That makes sense at all.

GH: God molding you over time.

RS: Over time. Like literally, like I tell people and people laugh, when I said people that have known me for a long time, I'm like, I am so not who I used to be and it's just really. It's like, the shedding of a new skin, like you just don't even recognize the old person. So it's been an experience.

GH: So have your kids been exposed to your activism? Are they a part of that or is it something that you keep separate or--.

RS: No, they are when there were, when this last past summer when we were protesting, and I have had, they're teenagers now. And so I have conversations with them and they've experienced enough injustice for themselves that they are able to identify it, call it out. And I, my middle daughter used to be very introverted and shy. She's still a little bit introverted and shy, but she, it doesn't stop her now from like, she'll write the principal a letter and say, I don't like this. This is happening. And this is not fair. This is not right. Or like go to a teacher and say, you should not be doing this. And you should not be talking to people like this or, you know, really standing up and doing things that I, I'd never thought she'd be doing because she was so--, but I think the experiences that we've had here in like with our own things that have been unjust towards us, cause there have been a lot and just experiencing that.

And then I take them to every meeting. Every, they've sat through every meeting, they've heard countless testimonies, we have house meetings and they've sat through, how they told their own stories and shared of themselves with others and, you know, fellowshiped with others around, you know, injustice enough over these past six years that they're now able to, like I said, identify it, call it out and name, and do something

about it for themselves. So that, and that makes me as a mom like, Oh, okay. I did something great. To see them like, you know, even guiding their, their peers to be like, you know, you shouldn't do this or, you know, let's have a conversation about this. Or when I, my oldest daughter is 18. And I sometimes, like through social media, like she, her friends will say something like, especially during election season and, you know, people were saying all kinds of crazy things that she would like call her friends out on social media and be like, you know, that was dumb. Why would you say that this is why you shouldn't say that? Or, you know, whatever. So it's actually pretty cool.

GH: That's amazing. So I guess I came across a mention of you in a discussion of affordable housing in Charleston and about your move here. And is that something that has played a major role in the, I guess the way you've decided to focus your activism?

RS: Yeah, I think so, because I just, I'm the type of person who, like, if I know something that you can do to better yourself, or if I've done something that may work for you and, I'm just the type of person who wants to share, you know, the knowledge that I have or anything. I'm, really anything that I have. I just want to share whatever I have with whoever is in need. That's just the way I was raised to, if somebody's hungry, feed them. If somebody is cold, make them warm and if they need, you know, if they need something, give it to them. So I think it's another thing that has kept me here is because like I had so many problems finding housing and I felt like I'm pretty smart. You know, I, I never had these problems anywhere else.

And, I feel like I can just navigate through things, but I felt like if I can't navigate through these things, how many other people are having this problem? You know what I mean? Like how many other people are having this problem and they don't know how to,

how to find resources or they are not able to network with people because a lot of people lack the skill of networking. They don't have that ability. Or like, just anything, like if they just don't know that these things exist, how are they living? What is there? And if this is my, I felt like my quality of life had, I had these thoughts and expectations of like, when I got to Charleston, my, like I was going to have affordable housing and I was going to have a job that was going to like, be able to, I was going to be able to afford where I stay at.

Like I was going to be able to give my kids like this better life than what I had come from, you know? And I came here with that expectation. I'm like how many other people come here with the expectation that life is going to be better only to be disappointed, to be homeless, to be, you know what I mean? All of these things. And I think that just really drives me to like, I can't leave here until like, I've made an impact on housing. Like you gotta get some better housing before you push me out of here. You know what I mean? It goes back to that rebellious heart. Like you, ain't going to get me to leave until you give some more people, some housing, like I'm going to be leaving all of these people who don't have what I, what I came here for.

You got to get some better school systems. Particularly for black and brown kids, the school system has to change because my kids experienced these types of things in this school system. So, you gotta make this better for the people who are going to come after me, because they're going to be people who come after me who going to be looking for the same thing. And what did I do to help make that better? I didn't do nothing. All this I've been here the whole six years. And I didn't do nothing to make that better. So the next set of people are going to come here and I'm supposed to just leave it for them. No,

they got to say, I'm going to finished what Raynique started or this, you know, something you can't just not. So, I think that, that has kept me like striving for better because I just, I don't want to leave it the way I saw it. That's just like you come into a room and the room there's trash on the floor. You gonna just walk right over the trash, or you going to just get a broom and dustpan and pick it up? I'm the person that's going to, even if it's not my house, I'm gonna clean it up and put it away. Cause that's what I was taught. So--.

GH: So how long did it take you to find housing when you first started, I guess trying to find somewhere to live here?

RS: So when I initially came here was in July of 2015 and I got a housing voucher. I had my housing voucher from LA, which I transferred here, which I expected (laughs) that I was going, it was going to be easy for me to find a place, right? Because I have a voucher from the state that says that they're going to pay my rent no matter what that's, what a housing voucher is. So even if I don't have a job, whatever the case is, the person that owns this house is protected because the state says that they're going to pay X amount of dollars for me and my kids to be able to live here. Right. And I was like, this should be easy.

So many people do not accept the section eight voucher because mostly because of the stigma, that section eight people who are on section eight, don't take care of their homes, people who are on section eight are lazy. People who are on section eight, you know, receive welfare. And they, you not, that's all you're going to get, which if that's the rent, that's the rent. You know, if the rent is \$900 and section eight is paying you \$900, what else are going to ask for? You know? But just because of all of these stigmas around section eight housing like or low-income housing is what I found. It wasn't necessarily

that they didn't trust it, and that they didn't trust me. They just didn't trust section eight voucher holders, period. And then even though I have a section eight voucher that guarantees X amount of rent, I still needed to make three times the amount of rent in order to qualify, to rent the house.

When South Carolina's minimum wage, the most I had made when I was here was just twenty-five thousand dollars for me and three kids. So how can I, you know what I mean? So how was I going to be able to even meet the qualifications that you had when I was not making it? And at the time I was making twenty-five thousand dollars, that was me working three jobs and having three kids. So, it was like, literally, how do you expect for someone to meet these qualifications? Like it was, the expectations for a person to own, to have their own place was ridiculous for a single mother of three kids. I just could not, I, there was no way that I was going to make, I was going to make it. So with section eight, you always have, you already have these other rules as well. You only have a certain, you have a time limit that you can find a place. So they give you three months. Then they, you could get a three month, one, three month extension in South Carolina.

So that's only six months to find a house under these stipulations that somebody is going to rent a section to a section eight voucher holder. And that you're going to meet the qualifications of making enough money to qualify. Even though you have somebody saying, here's the amount of money every single month guaranteed, and nobody would do it on the, I got, so I ended up having, I ended up exhausting my entire voucher twice, and then I had to get an extension from California in order for me to have one more month. And I found a place to stay on the very last day that my volunteer was going to expire at five o'clock. I signed my paperwork and didn't lose my voucher.

It was extremely hard. So that just gives you like this. And this is not just my experience. This is other people. And, it had to do also with the quality of the homes. So if I wanted to just find any old place, it would be me and all three of my children in a one bedroom house and, or a one bedroom apartment that was as big as my living room is now. That's what I would find. That was the amount of money that would qualify me with the \$25,000 a year, a one bedroom for all of them. My son is six one.

And, section eight was okay with that. They were like, well, if that's all you can find, you know what I'm saying? That's all you got. You just got to deal with that. While people that live where I work, I lived in North Charleston because when we came we lived with family. I lived in my grandmother's house, my children, me and all my children slept in one bed. And so I went to, I found it when I found a job, I found a job in Mount Pleasant where there's like these huge million dollar homes. And so I would go home every day and sleep in the bed with my kids and come and work over here where people have like a huge backyard and a six bedroom house.

And I was living, working, and driving a car that had three bad tires and one good tire. I get out the car, put some air in the tire, go to work and come back outside all the time. It'd be flat? Push my car to the gas station, put some air back in there, go pick up all my kids come--. I was also traveling, spending majority of my time traveling to and from work every single day, because it was like two hours to get there two hours to get back. So, it was just the quality of life. Like I said, was just, it was diminished. So it took a lot of faith to God. What is this? Why is this? How is this?

GH: So you're I'm going to jump around if that's okay. Your family was already, were they already a member of Charity Missionary Baptist?

RS: My family was already members there. My uncle's a deacon there. My aunt is a minister there, so they've, they've all been here for years. And then I came six years ago. My dad's been here now, three years. My dad's been here. And he went through the same phase the first year. It was like, why did I come here? Everybody went through the same hardship.

GH: So I guess I mean, how has the transition been? I know you were, you were a team leader, correct. Can you tell me about that? About being a team leader for, I guess for Charity Missionary with the Justice Ministry.

RS: With CAJM. Yeah. So, that was hard cause I was a team leader and I didn't know nobody. And I took the team leader role under the direction of my pastor, because he was like, this is what you got to do. Everybody got a job here. This is what you're going to do. I was like, Oh, okay. This is what I'm gonna do. And I knew nobody, but my family and it was like six of them. And they were already on somebody else's team. No, it just, it, I told myself that this was how I was going to make friends. I was going to introduce myself and I was going to be a part of the Justice Ministry. And I want you to come to this meeting and really just like, give it this good old sales pitch, which clearly didn't work.

But I just, it really was how I got to know people. It was, it became that's just how I, who I knew. That's who I know here, who I know here is people who do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God. Like all of the people who I know have that same mandate and they walk in that same--. They might not be in the same faith tradition, but they walk in that same understanding that we are here to make the world better and to use our righteous anger in efforts to do that. So it did help in a sense of making friends. And

what do you do? Oh I'm part of the Justice Ministry. So, and that's literally how I started talking to people and my general introduction to everybody, I go to Charity and I'm a part of this ministry.

So, it worked, he said, that's what you're going to do. And that's what I did.

GH: Exactly. So how was the, I guess the transition or the move from being a team leader to being an organizer?

RS: Oh, so I think I tell my, I tell my lead organizer. I was so bad as a team leader that she had to, like, they had to find something else for me to do. It was just so sad. Part of being a team leader is like, you have to you're trying to build these relationships with folks. So, normally a team leader would use their relationships that they already have existing and just, you know, build upon those relationships. I had no relationships. And so it didn't really work for me to I wasn't really keen on finding, people's like, self-interest at the very beginning, like understanding, like, why are you here? Like, it just was taking so long. And I wasn't, I didn't feel like I was really good at it. And then, but I had this passion for the change that I wanted to see, I think.

And so an organizer was like, I was, we were building relationship and she was listening to me like this job doesn't pay me. And it's just really not what I want to do. I really would love to be like helping people more. And I want to be doing, I'm passionate about like really making a difference in the community rather than what I'm, what I'm doing now. And so she heard that and she was like, well, there's, this is not a thing that you could do now, but why don't you apply for this administrative position with CAJM? And so I was like, okay. And so I applied for the administrative position and during the interview Treva our lead organizer was like you ever thought about being an organizer.

And I was like, what's the organizer? What is that? She was like kind of explaining it to me. And then like I put in my application and I drove all the way to Virginia with that bad car, with all the bad tires and did this interview and stayed in these people's house who I didn't even know and had like no money and had to borrow money and do all this stuff and stayed there for three days and came back and was like, I'm gonna get this job.

I'm gonna get this job, and did not get the job. And then, so I was like, Oh, okay. And so I just went and I went to more trainings. I got more understanding. I kept coming to the Justice Ministry. I kept being a part of it. I kept trying it out as a team leader. I kept, you know, trying to build the relationships in the community. And I was encouraged to apply two more times. And the third time was a charm and that was a transition, that it was just another buildup to, you know, make me better. I wasn't ready the first time. And then the third time I was, so it was good. It was character building.

GH: So what were you doing before that?

RS: So, I had several jobs. I was driving Uber. I was working, at a call center. I was working, my main job was working at a mortgage loan processing company in Mount Pleasant and then just other odd, I worked at a catering company and I worked at Bosch at night and I just was doing all kinds of stuff. So I'm trying to make the ends meet.

That was hustling. Yeah. I wasn't going to not eat. So, like I said, I grew up in survival mode, so I knew I just needed to survive by any means. And as soon as I said, we came all the way out here and I didn't have, I think I just realized that I had, I don't think I had the, I knew I didn't have the money and I just didn't have the energy that it took to go back home either. It just took a lot to like pack up everything that I had and

move it across the world. And I just was like, I've gone, I've moved. Because even when I was finding a place to stay the lady from the section eight place, she was like, just go home, every week. But I would come and I'd be like, I haven't found anything. She'd be like, why are you here, bye just go home. And I'd be, like why would I do that? Like, why? Like I said, that rebellious heart, like, you want me to go? Why are you trying to get me to leave?

GH: Yeah. You already used too much energy. You couldn't give up then.

RS: No, I did too much. Yeah. All my stuff was in the inside of my car. I had spent all my savings to pack up my life and come here and let my shoes get moldy in my grandmother's garage, I was not doing that. I was like, girl, I lost my shoes. Do you know? I lost my shoes. We are not doing that. She didn't understand that. So--.

GH: I bet through all of that, you ended up learning your way around Charleston fairly well, there's one way to learn Charleston. That's

RS: Do you know how many times we got me and my kids? That was a thing every weekend, we would just go get lost. And, just like also, because my grandmother was just mean, we would just like go to the library and like spend the day there, or go to the beach and spend the day there, or just like drive around and look at houses that we wanted to live in and dream about, like what we were going to do. And just all of that kind of weird, crazy stuff. We just had hope. That's what it was. Lots of hope and not a lot of, just a lot of hope.

GH: So, since being with the Justice Ministry, are there any like particular experiences in terms of activism that have really stood out to you or even in terms of, I guess, faith building that have you know been just really impactful to you?

RS: Well, all of it has been impactful to building my faith. I think it has just, like I said, this experience has really changed my views on who I thought God was and who he really is, and really who I am as well in my faith. And then the other part of the question was, has it changed my views on activism?

GH: No. Anything, any experiences that have stood out in terms of your activism?

RS: Oh, all of them. When we first came to Charleston, we were, when I first came to Charleston, one of the things that we worked on was getting the Charleston City Council, I mean the Charleston Police Department to do an audit for racial bias. They had been working on that before I came here. And I think we were two years into it before when I became an organizer. So just to see that whole process of like the City Council going from like, no, we don't have a problem to like, yes, we do have a problem with bias and our policing, and yes, we will do an audit. And just to see how that unfolded, like, I said again, with that power of persistent people power, I'm just always so amazed by that, by how it can change. It has the ability to change minds and mindsets and just the work that we do, I think becoming an organizer and like being a team leader is one thing.

And like seeing that in that aspect, but as an organizer, seeing the resiliency of people, (00:54:30) like that is amazing to see like the defeats and then to come, like all of these people who come back and like lift each other up to like, do it again. You know what I mean? Like all of these people like have the courage enough to go back and say like, we didn't win this one, but we're gonna try again. Let's do it, let's do it over. Maybe we didn't see this part. Let's look at the, let's look at the research again. Let's go back, let's call some more people. Let's find some more people who want to do this. Like even that,

cause people say no all the time. And I remember as a team leader, like so many people like hanging up in my face cause they didn't know who I was.

And like just the resiliency of the people to like never stop and just be so persistent in everything from like making sure our organization is funded. Do we want it to hire another organizer? So, like the people like poor people came out of their pocket and like gave what they had to make sure that we got, we were able to hire another organized. We were able to have trainings. We were able to, you know what I mean? Like where do they do that at? Like it's amazing to see like the power of people is the most amazing thing to me.

GH: So how has COVID impacted that sort of dynamic? Has it had a major impact on the Justice Ministry in terms of how y'all operate?

RS: Yeah, we had to change a lot of stuff. So, and a lot of what we do is, you know, us coming together, being in the same presence, being around one another. Like I said, one of my excuse me, one of my experiences, my first experiences was seeing the diversity in the room and to walk into the room and to see that here in Charleston, like people of all faith traditions, people of all colors, just working together being one of the most impactful things. And me just always expecting that when I, when I go out to stuff like that. And so COVID of course just knocked that out, because now we can't gather. We can't be in the room together and it feels like we're all like separated in these spaces. And I think one thing that we saw, especially in the African-American congregations is just like the real disparity amongst that group of people, as opposed to like our predominantly white congregations who have just like, who are more affluent in where they live, the spaces they have and just their ability to move, to change, you know, for

whatever reason, because whether it be, you know, having a laptop, having the phone, that's able, being able to, you know, go out and buy stuff to, to adapt to this.

You know, it just seems like it was a gradual come through for the African-American congregations and it's still very slow to adapt to like the virtual environment really. I still have congregations that struggle with, you know, how to zoom, how to get on YouTube, how to use Facebook. And it made me see like how we take for granted that the ability to do these things. Like a large portion of our organization is older. Just, we think that, you know, everybody is like, can comprehend like what to do when your zoom crashes. And then you have this 70 year old person that's like Raynique.

I have no idea how to like log back in. And this was person who was like a teacher for 30 years, you know, you're like, well, Ms. Such and such, like, you gotta learn how to use the computer. And it's not that simple. They didn't grow up with this technology. This is unknown to them. And it's just like, you know, you just really get to see the close gaps. So, and unfortunately like a lot, a lot of things in our society, black and brown people are more susceptible to those disparities than anybody else. So just, and then just you've grown to know.

And love these people whom you work with and work for and to see COVID take them away. That I think was the hardest thing to watch as people just disappeared and not just people disappear from death. Yes. But they also just disappeared into a seclusion.

I recognize how this ministry was strong in other ways of like, it really gave people hope. It really gave people something to do, it really just was their thing, you know? And so to watch, I know we have some members who have just deteriorated because of like the lack of being close, the lack of, you know, you, we recognize that. I

think we just recognized the need that we have for one another during the whole thing, if that makes sense.

GH: One hundred percent, it really does. So, I guess, where do you, where do you hope to see the Justice Ministry move forward after this?

RS: Surprisingly like I think through it all like the death and the trauma and everything that we went through this past year, I think it made us stronger. I think we came out on top. I think that most of us, I think that it was an eye opener for those who are just like, I'm going through the motions with justice and saying like, you know, there's some folks that like, I'm a throw money at this thing at this problem. And, you know, feel okay in my spirit like they. Once COVID happened I think that you couldn't say that anymore because now I think it kind of leveled the playing field for everybody and rich and poor people saw that like you are susceptible to, you can lose everything at the swipe of a finger, you know, and it kind of put us all on and it kind of put us all at a different level of understanding.

Like I said, that we needed one another and that everybody deserves a safe place to stay or, you know, all this, everybody deserves that equality. I think most of us understand that now. And so I just, I see us growing, honestly, I see more people opening their eyes. I don't, I don't, I don't see us growing so much right now that we don't have a need for a Justice Ministry, but I see so much more potential for I've hoped that more people will be involved. More people will be involved for the right reasons in that. I have hope for Charleston that I didn't have before, because, because it's what I've seen, what I see now and how I see people working now and how I see people thinking now and how I see people moving now, you know, not just because of COVID, but because of like, I

think I look at COVID like something that just slowed us all down and like put us at a freeze and was like, look at yourselves, look at what you're doing.

Do you want to be like, this is like, it challenged us to be like, is this the person who you really want to be, is this the nation that you really want to be? Is this the city? Is this the state that you really want to be like, who are you? And so I think people are saying like, I don't want to be that. I want to be fair. I want to be just, I want to help other people. I needed help six months ago, you know, I was in a place where, and that's the thing, like a lot of people were removed from meeting help and then needed it. And then they were like, Oh, this is what that feels like. I don't want to ever feel this again, just the same way, like me. Like I experienced that thing with housing. I experienced that thing with the school district. I experienced that thing with my car and I was just like, I don't want to ever feel like this again. And you know what? I don't think anybody else should feel like this either. So, whatever's in my power to do, I'm going to do so I do see us growing because people are going to feel like that.

And then in a few years, you're going to look around right now, we got 39 congregations, but this is the Holy City. And it's a church or congregation on every single corner in Charleston. And I really have hopes that majority of those congregations will have a Justice Ministry because of CAJM.

And if I have to go knock on all they doors, I will.

GH: I have no doubt that you would. So how has the recent events for the Black Lives Matter movement and particularly that deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, has that impacted, I guess, either caused more people to come to y'all or has it changed the mission at all? Or I guess what I'm trying to get at--.

RS: I don't think it has changed the mission. I think CAJM as a whole has always realized that Black lives matter. And I think that is something that we've been trying to tell the rest of Charleston. And I think that we've just been a space for people who have had the aha out loud to come and say, Oh yeah, this is, and most of them have just been like, yeah, I'm going to give this money to help this cause because I just listened. It was me. I messed up. Here you go. Here's some money and kind of still do with the, throwing the money at a thing, which is okay, cool. We accept that. But for a lot of folks, I think it's just been like, well, what can I do? This was wrong. And an awakening moment of like, we can't keep operating in this same vein.

So how can I be a part of changing that? So, we've gotten many, many, many, many a call to do that. I want to do something different. Even folks who are not necessarily aligned with any faith tradition, which we welcome as well, or like, I just want to do what's right. You know, I just want to do what's right. And it's, this feels right. So how can we do that? So, and they see the work that we've done before and they see the work that we're continuing to do. Like this is in line with where we want to go. And that's exciting to me cause like, think of all the other stuff that we can do and other things that we could change, if there's like more and more, the more people we get, the more things we can change to where Charleston won't even look the same in the next ten years, you know? Cause a lot of people are going to be doing. A lot of people can be thinking like me, how can I change the world? So I'm excited about that.

GH: I want to go back to, you mentioned something about the school district. You had some struggles with the school district.

RS: Yeah. The disparities for Charleston towards black and brown children, black and brown, it seems like black and brown children are an afterthought in this district.

Like--.

They're just the little nappy headed step child that nobody wants to, nobody wants to love. And the way it's similar to the judicial system of America, like nobody wants to own that it's pretty messed up for them. And it wasn't designed to help them. It wasn't designed to create opportunity for that group of people or to even see them at all. And so it treats them like that. And then you almost have to be magical in order for you to move past this system.

Like my daughter struggled in math and science and so that's, she's always struggling, but instead of helping her, they've pushed her further and further behind, seemingly. Instead of giving my son opportunities to expand his mind, they've just given him classes that don't challenge him at all whatsoever. And then when he's bored in class, they label him the troublemaker and suspend him from school when he's bored, because you're not challenging him. You know, they praise white children, and give them and give them less accountability for discrepancies and give them a way out of conflict rather than addressing conflict and holding them accountable for actions like they do black children. Example is my son and went to school in Mount Pleasant. He and four other little boys. They were in the second grade, they all were playing and they were all were play fighting really rough.

My son was going to be suspended. The only child that was going to be suspended because he was the only child that was seen as the aggressive child in the school, in the, in that group of kids. He was put out of class for asking, literally asking a

question to the teacher. He, they were teaching something and he asked, he asked the teacher in the social studies class. And he said something to the effect that, well, that isn't, I didn't read that. I didn't learn that about this part of history or this part of this thing. There was something about slavery and where he was like, well, what happened to the Kings and Queens? And they were like, no, these people were slaves and he, no, but black people weren't just slaves. They were Kings and Queens. The teacher was upset about it. The class is like, instead of using that as a teaching moment for yourself, even, you know--.

You labeled him as a bad child and put him out. My daughter at school, in Mount Pleasant, she got a bad grade on a test and she's again, very anxious, but she has high hopes for herself. And so, she got a bad grade on a test and she was so sad and she was just, just distraught. And so, she was crying like any other third grader would cry and they would just feel so bad about it. And she so she cried and she cried. And so, they sent her to the principal's office for crying. And then the principal said, if you don't stop crying, if you don't stop crying, I'm going to call the SRO officer.

And so that made her like extremely--. She's like you're going to call the police on me for not, for crying. And so, when I got to the school, she was, like literally hyperventilating having an asthma attack crying because she was now, she was in fear because she just watched black bodies die at the hands of police officers. And you just like literally threatened her life in her own eyes. You know, because now you're going to call the police because I won't stop crying. Like just these things that they do to black and brown children here that just antagonize them and make them feel so small and make them feel so much less than like they don't matter. And then you wonder why they act

like they don't matter because you treat them like that every single day you treat, you treat them. Like they just, they're not special. And they are.

And I--. I don't understand it. But I can't, I can't leave because you're just going to treat somebody else's child the same way that you treated my child. And that's not fair. So we gotta get better. We gotta get better. It's, I've never, I didn't know what it was like to live in the civil rights movement until I lived in the civil rights movement.

GH: We've got to make a change.

RS: Yeah. We, Charleston County school district suspend black and brown children almost ten times more than they suspend white children almost ten times more.

During COVID it didn't take a rocket scientist to know that the children who were in who were the most in need, where the children were right in the North area who didn't have access to technology, didn't have a computer, didn't have all of those things. And when their grades started to fail and to fall, and they have this extreme loss of learning, we went right back into a test standardized testing. During that time we had standardized testing during COVID when we had this extreme loss of learning. And then when it came time for school choice, you know, we did, we still use that same data from this same year where we know that these children will be at a disadvantage. And we use that same data to calculate where these kids were going to go to school. The next, the very next year, when they did their poorest ever, we still use that same data to get them into a school. That would be a better choice for where they were when children right on the other side of the bridge had a different, had a different story. We're actually in person school.

We got to do better. And we, and we don't say anything. Nobody says anything. Nobody, nobody says nothing. We just go and we operate like it's business as normal.

Then we give this false narrative that there's the there's equality in the schools. When we know that there's not, we know that it's not, we know that the students that go to school in the north area are not even getting in the same--. They're not even being academically challenged. Like the kids on the other side of the bridge, they don't even have the same work. And I can attest to that because my kid had been to school on both sides of the bridge. They don't even have the same level of work. Not even the same level. It makes absolutely no sense. It's disgusting. Actually.

GH: Do you mind if I ask what you mean by the bridge? Cause I know like here in Summerville, we have a geographical definition. We use I -26 as a divider between main Summerville and Ladson Summerville. And it kind of, there's an economic difference. Yeah. Cultural.

RS: Yeah. So, when you go to Mount Pleasant, you cross over the bridge to Mount Pleasant, the [interstate] 526, and you're going in to Mount Pleasant schools. Those schools have a better, they're more academically challenged. They have a better, their schools are even cleaner. Their schools just even look better. It just looks, it even looks physically looks better than what these, then what you're giving to these children. It is not equal. At all. Is not an equal opportunity. You do not treat all children the same and you're not giving every child the best the very best that you can. You don't even hear the parents in the same way. Because when I was a parent in Mount Pleasant, you heard me differently than I'm a parent in North Charleston.

Disgusting. The racism is disgusting and it's antiquated. And it has, it has to do with the whole system of oppression. That's here in Charleston where you have the same leaders for over 30 years, you have the same ways of thinking the same mindset. You're

never getting fresh ideas. You're never getting new thoughts. You're always listening to the same group of people to make the same decisions, to do the same things all the time and keeping people in the same pots and never, it never changed. And nothing it's disgusting. Charleston ought to be ashamed of itself for how it treats its own people.

GH: So I guess within the Justice Ministry, have, you seen, has there been a struggle, I guess, to adapt amongst its members to this new idea of coming together and working together? Or is it something that immediately clicked? Not immediately, but yeah.

RS: Yeah, no. I think even when we add newer congregations and people who, you know, there is a, a time frame of like the way that we do things and like everybody adjusting to change. Cause every time we, we come together, there's something that's different. Everybody coming together and just adapting to just like being, I think when you're in another faith tradition it's different. Like we're all similar, but there's differences. So, but I think what has helped that to happen is the conversations, the relationship building, the understanding that even though we're all unique in our own, there are some commonalities in there. Some like we all still dislike this, there's this concept that we all deserve fair treatment, fair housing, fair, you know, and, equity. And that's what, as long as you keep those as the grounding force, you can have those tough conversations. People will get just like in any relationship, you'll get mad and you'll walk away and you'll storm away, but you come back. Like, I love you and I wanna, I want to stay together. And I think that's ultimately what has happened. We've gotten mad. We've walked away from conversations, come back and be like, you know what? This means

this much to me. And I love you. And I want to stay together. It's a lot of heart work to do.

GH: So at the Nehemiah actions, have there been anything that has, there ever been anything that shocked you or that has kind of taken you aback at all and either a positive or negative way? I guess

RS: I think the initial shock, of like I said it all happening and the change. Because I think my perception of Charleston was just that it will, this is what it is and this is what it will always be. And to see that not be the case, to see the actual changing of hearts and minds and ideals happen because of the power of people, because of the persistency, because of the research done. And I think that was the, the most shocking thing. Like for me, maybe not for everybody, but for me it was like this really works. Like I can get enough people, power and enough communication in the room. Cause that's what it is. It's a dialogue at the Nehemiah action. The people in the community who are rarely ever heard, have the opportunity to say, this is what you did to me. And this is how it made me feel. I don't like it. This is how you can change it. This is how you can make it better. And then the people in power have the opportunity to say, I hear you. I heard you. And I'm going to try to change it. Or I'm going to try to rectify the hurt, it's very restorative for the community if they allow it to be.

GH: So--. Trying to gather, sorry, how was the pushback that y'all faced? Has that been difficult to handle or is it something that you've just kind of taken in stride as it's come or--.

RS: I think it's a combination, (1:23:10) It's hurtful that the people that you've elected to represent you will not meet with you, not take the time out to hear your

thoughts and you've supported them in their endeavors and then you just, you know, when you need their support, they're not there, is kind of a slap in the face. So that's hurtful, I think. And then it's also like, well, I expected that of you, you know, I expected you to act that way. So let me just go ahead and try something different or try it a different way. It's a combination of them both.

GH: So, I guess what is your experience with the selection process for choosing what, or for being a part of the process of what the Justice Ministry chooses to focus on, or, you know, what your mission is going to be for a particular year? What has your experience been with that process?

RS: My experience has that it's an opportunity for, especially for people of color and communities of color, to have an opportunity, to have a seat and have to sit down and have the conversations that they wouldn't never have. We wouldn't have like these regular people conversations. We always have to have like one representative from our, from our group of people, our, our community, our neighborhoods stating these things that we talk about amongst ourselves. But this is the opportunity for you as an individual person to come up and say, this is what I don't like. This is bothering me. This is a problem for me and my family. And to share that amongst a larger group. And then the next step in that process will be for the groups to identify those problems, name them all, and then to vote on which one is the most pressing.

So, I think, I think it's a great opportunity, particularly for people of color to come and have that seat and express those emotions. And I talked a little bit earlier about, you know, just having that anger and that anxiety to let some of that anger and anxiety go and to do something like to see it formulate into a thought and be put into something positive.

You know what I mean? And even for other faith traditions or other, other folks that are not of color to, to see that they share something with somebody else that doesn't look like them, that you're more connected to people who are you, who, who the world says that you're not supposed to be anything like, you know what I mean? So it just connects us to say that we all are human. We all have a problem. We all don't like to be treated poorly. Let's do something about it.

GH: So, I guess one of my final questions is, is there anything that I haven't asked about that you feel like you'd like to express about the Justice Ministry? Or is there anything about your experience as an activist and as a member of the Ministry, that's really had an impact on you the most?

RS: I would just say that (1:27:23) don't know if I could do what you do. Yes. You can because you know that if you have a problem, you want to solve it. And you know that if your loved one has a problem and you want to stop it, it's not just the, and people think that just because we operate through, through places of faith that that's, the only people who could be a part of this work when this is just doing the right thing for the right, for the right, for the sake of doing the right thing is not, it's not all that deep. As, you know, you put all these words to it. And the style is really, really pretty, but it's really just doing the right thing because it's the right thing, helping people, because people need help it's nothing more than that. So you can do that. That's easy. That's all I was saying. Like, let people know that this is not, it's not as hard as you think it's not as difficult as you think. So that's all I would say.

GH: Is the ministry also I guess as a means of not really ministering to people, but just saying that, you know, despite everything there's people here is just like another

vehicle for communicating God's love to people, without them having to be a member of the faith?

RS: Yeah that's what the ministry is, it's going out and telling people like, like I said, do the right thing or here's some help do the right thing. Here's a community like it, this is community work. That's, that's, that's all it is. This is a community project, the community coming together to, to, to make itself better.

GH: I've heard someone else say before that it's a beloved, the beloved community of Charleston.

RS: Yep, yeah, all the people that we work with and work for, are people that we love.

We're doing this to honor them, to share with them, to show them to care for them, to love them, to love ourselves. This is as much for me as it is for my neighbor and for my friend, for my cousins, for my grandmother, you know. It's all, it's all encompassed into one's community work, like I said.

GH: So I guess, is there anything else you'd like to say? Or?

RS: No, I appreciate you taking the time to ask questions and to do all of this. I wish you much luck on this project. I hope I was helpful.

GH: Very, Yes.

RS: I hope I hope this was, this is something that I hope you can use. It. That's all.

GH: Most definitely, it's been a very uplifting and also motivating. I've really enjoyed hearing from you. I really have, I really appreciate it. So, thank you.

RS: Thank you, have a wonderful day, and let me know if you need anything else.

END OF INTERVIEW

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