

TRANSCRIPT– BRANDON CHAPMAN

Interviewee: BRANDON CHAPMAN

Interviewer: HANNAH COWAN JONES

Interview Date: April 12, 2021

Location: Charleston SC and Washington DC by Zoom

Length: 55 minutes

HANNAH COWAN JONES: Okay, so Brandon, just for the sake of the recording, can you tell me your full name, where you were born and what year you were born?

BRANDON CHAPMAN: Yeah, Brandon Chapman. Born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina. And I was born in 1993.

HCJ: Okay, awesome. So, you call Charleston home?

BC: Yeah.

HCJ: Yeah. What was it like growing up in Charleston?

BC: I mean, I think— so I grew up in kind the Mount Pleasant area. And then went to college at CofC, of course. And I think, you know, Charleston of course is a beautiful place. You know, be it, the history that's here. Be it, you know, the fact that we've got what, three beaches within like a forty-mile radius. So, of course you grow up with that. And at the same time, I think that, you know, Charleston is known as this nice place. We're known for our Southern hospitality. And I think that also behind that, you

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know, there's a lot of racism in Charleston that, you know, the city— I heard a pastor that I used to work with talk about it like a Disney World history, right? That, you know, you go to Disney World, everything is like this magical place. And I think in a lot of ways, Charleston is like that where it's like, you know, we're going to talk about all the nice things in Charleston. We're going to talk about the shrimp and grits, the culinary scene, the cobblestone streets. You're going to go down to The Battery, but we don't talk about you know, the racism that's in the city. And we don't talk about, you know, the fact that our education system is killing black kids. And so my experience growing up in Charleston is one of, it's almost like a false history of, you know, we want to, we want to be this place where tourists come and spend their money, but we're actually not going to be this place that grapples with our history of racism in the way that not only did we talk about it, but we also have enacted laws and policies that deals with the vestiges of enslavement because you know, Charleston was a passport to enslavement in the United States. Right? And so, I think that history you see the remnants of that in the current Charleston that we see today.

HCJ: Hmm. That's very interesting. So did you feel that like in the education system? I mean, growing up here, were you hearing this at school or what was your education experience in Charleston?

BC: So I actually did pre-K, kindergarten in public school system, but my mother and my grandmother decided to send me to private school. And my grandmother or my mother's words was "Charleston County doesn't educate blacks the way they need to be educated." And she said, you know, not because black kids aren't capable- it's because

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our system is one that treats white kids as a problem. Well, before we try to say, you know, we're actually going to work to make sure they get the same education as white kids get, right. And so and that's the conversation I didn't have with them until I was much older. Like I wasn't, when I went to first grade, they weren't really giving me that nuance like that.

HJC: Right.

BC: But yeah, so, you know, and it's like, I grew up in a single-parent home. My mom didn't have the money to send me to private school. If not for my grandmother, you know, providing financial assistance, I wouldn't have gone to private school. And so, on the one hand, when I think about my education you know, my mother and grandmother afforded me an opportunity to that I don't think everyone gets as far as education. And it's also like, they shouldn't have had to feel like they had to do that. You know, they are taxpayers you know, our money goes through this education system. And so, there are systems should have been set up in a way that the inequities and education wasn't there. And it's like, you know, it's Charleston County School District, the school board has repeatedly failed black kids. South Carolina education itself has repeatedly failed black kids. Right? And so, you know, I get why they sent me to private school and I'm very thankful for my education. And it's also like, there's that injustice that they shouldn't have had to do that because the way of our system is set up.

HCJ: Right. Where did you go?

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BC: So I went to a New Israel Christian School from first to seventh, which was the school downtown. But they closed because they didn't have, they didn't have enough students to be self-sufficient financially. And then ninth and tenth, I went to Ferndale Baptist, which was in North Charleston. And that was also a school that ended up closing down because they didn't have enough students. And then tenth, eleventh, and twelfth, I went to Palmetto Christian Academy which was connected to East Cooper Baptist Church in Mount Pleasant. And I did tenth, eleventh, and twelfth there.

H CJ: Okay, awesome. So, I'm hearing lots of Christian academies. Is that big in your life? The faith-based stuff.

BC: Yeah, very much. I grew up at an AME church. You know, the church that we call home back in McClellanville, the property was donated by my great-great-great-grandfather. I believe it goes back that far. So yeah, the private schools I went to were Christian private schools and you know, it's kind of, I didn't necessarily want to, I wanted to be a community organizer, wanted to do faith based organizing, but of course, as you know, I ended up working at CAJM. So I did, I was deep in just faith-based organizing be it from the Christian tradition. But also, you know, working with a synagogue mosque as well on these various issues.

H CJ: Wonderful. So, you somehow ended up at College of Charleston. What did you study there?

BC: Yeah, I was a double major in Political Science and African American Studies.

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H CJ: Awesome. Okay. That's great. So, I feel like you were headed towards your future career there.

BC: Yeah, well, originally I wanted to be a lawyer. So, law school was kind of the path I was on. I was originally Political Science at first and then you know, Consuelo Francis you know, may she rest in peace. She pushed me. She was like, you know, you already almost have all your Poli Sci credits. So, I was a junior at this time. I still had to earn of course, like thirty more credits to graduate. And she was like, you know, you could double major and get your African American Studies major instead of it being a minor. I kind of was like, ah, no, I don't know. You know, I already have that one degree, but then I ended up double majoring, and it wasn't until having those classes in African American Studies where it was like, okay, so now I know the political dynamics. But for me, it's like if you don't understand how racism has impacted so many new laws and policies we have, you really don't know the American story. And so that's when I shifted from law school to organizing- which law school is still could be in my future. But that's when I kind of had that shift of now I want to organize. I was doing a paper on the Civil Rights movement and the Black Lives Matter movement kind of comparative analysis in Dr. [Mary] Crabtree's class. And that's kind of when I got to, you know, reading about Ella Baker and, you know, Dr. Monica Canyon, and understanding what they were doing and John Lewis and came to the point of wanting to be an organizer.

H CJ: That's awesome. So would you self-identify as an activist?

BC: I call myself an organizer. Yeah, I think activist, it's a good question. Cause I think that we kind of use it interchangeably. But I call myself an organizer because for

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me, it's like organizing is, you know, I'm all about voting people power. And really for me, it's like, you can have the best policy, you can word it as well as it could be, have all these fancy words. You can have a policy down in the footnotes, but if you don't have the power to get that policy enacted, it really doesn't mean anything. And so for me, I'd say I identify as an organizer because I think an activist, you know, you speak out against what's happening, you're working to fight some of that, but I don't think you specifically—you're not specifically doing that people power building. Yeah.

HCJ: No, I like that term. So after college, what did you kind of do in that time? Where are you looking for a job, or what were you doing?

BC: Yeah, so I at the College I started in 2016- it seems so long ago. So I, I had begun, so, like I said, I, I did that paper in Dr. Crabtree's class that would have been my African American Studies capstone, so that would've been January of 2016. So, I began looking at organizing jobs and I came across DART, Direct Action Research Training Center, and then CAJM of course popped up. And so, I applied to that. In the meantime, before I got the job, I went back to teaching karate and taekwondo. I've done that for many years. And so, I went back to doing that full-time as I was looking for organizing jobs, I think my first application would have been like June, 2016. And then you have like writing samples you have to do. There was a second round and then the third round had me going to Richmond in December of that year. And then I had another final interview in Charleston, and I was offered a position in December of 2016. And then I started organizing with CAJM in January of 2017.

HCJ: Okay. So what was your job title? Just community organizer or—

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BC: Yeah, it was associate community organizer. Yep.

H CJ: Okay. Okay. So what did kind of the day-to-day look like for you?

BC: Yeah, so the day-to-day- it changed by the day it wasn't like set hours. But really my job was I worked with initially like five, but I worked with about ten congregations and my role was to build relationships. And so, I built relationships with the clergy member, also members of the congregation in order to really just build a relationship with them. So let them know who I am, my background, understanding really what their self-interests are, you know, what they want for themselves and their family. And really under saying one, make the faith connection to, you know, our faith traditions call us to do this work. But then also understanding what makes them angry. And so, it could be the fact that people are homeless on the street. It could be the fact that there is no pre-K slots in education. Part of it could have been, you know, my mom being angry that she felt like she had to send me to private school. So, my job was to figure out what made them angry and to let them know that, you know, we don't have to just take this. We can build the power, the people power necessary in order to fight this. And so that was my role, build those relationships. I also being a, we are a nonprofit, we had investments from our members, but also we had corporate investments that we would do. So I was responsible for training members of the congregation that were leaders in that congregation to ask members invest, but also to train them, to go to like the CEO of Boeing or like the CEO of, of Trident Construction and have you know, present the organization and let them see how you guys have money, power. But we have people power. And as a business, you have a role in investing in this work and still training them

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around that. So that was another component. But then also I specifically worked in our housing campaign. And so, I worked with a group of about nine members from congregations from around Charleston County to really identify the housing problem in Charleston County. Why is it happening? Who is it happening to? But then also looking at nationwide best practices. We came to a housing trust fund as a best practice, and then figuring out what we need to do in order to get it implemented. Who is the decision maker? You know, how do we get the decision maker to do this? And so that was my kind of day-to-day. Like I said, it didn't look the same. And a given week I'd be meeting with ten to fifteen members of a congregation, but then you have staff meetings. You know, I tell people all the time that I got a greater understanding of where everything was in Charleston County, because I, I grew up in Mount Pleasant, owned our area, lived downtown for a time at CofC, did a lot of work on James Island and West Ashley. And so when I was organizing, going all these different places, I really learned what James Island looks like, what West Ashley would look like.

HCJ: Awesome. Well, you worked with, you know, ten congregations. Did you ever feel like there was a conflict with, you know, different congregations working together?

BC: I don't think I'd say so. I think that when you are working in a multi-racial different faith tradition different socioeconomic backgrounds, you know, there's always going to be spaces where I wouldn't say necessarily conflict, but I think that there will be some tense moments because, you know, we all have our own biases. We all have to challenge that. And when you're working on issues like policing, for instance, you can't

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talk about policing without talking about the racism and you can't talk about policing without connecting it to the fact that it was born out of when black folks are trying to get their freedom from those slave catchers. Right? And so being able to tell that truth, I think when you do that, when we live in a society where people automatically refer that police officers keep us safe, we automatically defer to the police. It takes some time to peel back those biases. And so I think that, you know, in my experience, there were moments where there was tension because, you know, being in this work takes some visceral truth-telling and that's not always easy. That takes, you know, you taking your lived experience. You may not have experienced it as you saying, you actually, let me take a step back and realize that I don't have this as experience. I might be looking at this from my experience. It might be one of privilege. And so, I have to be in a space where I listen to understand versus listening to respond. And so, you just have, I think that you have that pop-up and I still experienced that in my current work, have you got tensions when you're doing that visceral truth-telling and you have to, you know, you work, you peel back the layers and work through that with your members.

HCJ: Yeah, absolutely. So, we've kind of talked about those layers in Charleston. Do you feel like Charleston is unique in its social justice ministry with CAJM or do you think, you know, you see this all over the US?

BC: No, I don't think Charleston's unique. I think you know, so CAJM is an affiliate with the DART network, which has it might be twenty-four now, since I left last year, but I think about twenty-four to twenty-five sister organizations around the country that are doing the work and they may not be the same issues we work on because it's very

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much community led or they're working on it. But more broadly in my current job, like I'm working with folks who did work in Los Angeles, where they stopped the jail expansion, where they stopped a 3.5 billion jail expansion. And they also work to get Measure J pass, which took about ten percent of the county's funds, 900 million that has to go towards housing and education. Now they don't, they do organizing, it's not from a faith perspective, but it's so kind of that, that organizing model and that building power. And so, I don't think Charleston is unique. And then I think it's happening around the country. It just looks differently and it may not be faith-based organizing around the country. Yeah.

HCJ: Okay. That makes sense. So how long were you with CAJM?

BC: Three years and four months. Yeah, because it would have been January 2017 until April of last year.

HCJ: Okay. So, if it has, you know, this coalition of faith branches, do you feel like there's one faith branch or denomination or something in Charleston that's more involved?

BC: Yeah, I think, you know, we, so if you looked at the congregations that made up CAJM may very much Christian congregations now, of course, that they denomination is so varied because we have Baptist, Methodist, AME, Presbyterian, Catholic parishes as well. But I'd say that if you talk about traditions, which within that you have all those branches, but I'd say Christian churches kind of where the bulk of the work. KKBE synagogue downtown was very much involved and very much at the center at a lot of our work. But I think that, you know, when you, when you think about the

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numbers in CAJM it was Christian churches. And then, like I said, I haven't worked at CAJM I'm in a year and all the new congregations that have come about. And I think it's, it's still very much the Christian congregations.

H CJ: Right, right. Okay. Well, you're getting in work with CAJM, you know, kind of on the beginning there. Do you keep up with it today?

BC: Yeah, so I you know, I still am in contact with staff and I still have leaders that reached out to me you know, call me or text me to check in, and you know Charleston is home for me, so it's, you know, I still keep a feel for what's going on in Charleston- my family I've got to say dating back to my, my great-great-great-grandfather. I got roots in that area in Charleston. I keep up with it. So yeah.

H CJ: Okay. Awesome. Do you ever remember a time where you met with community resistance or anything like that to the justice ministry?

BC: Yeah, I think you know, it's, we did a lot around the audit for a racial bias in policing and you know, the audit I think it's underway in North Charleston- has been done in Charleston. And then when you look, when I look at it now, it's like, okay, we're on the other side, but I remember 2017. I tell people all the time I went to so many city council meetings that the guard knew me. You know, we, we had members from the various Congress and speaking at city council meetings. And you know, we got a lot of pushback from Tecklenburg you know, the mayor you know. I think organizing really showed me how power works and why I say that is, you know, council rules were changed. I remember, you know, there being a rule, we had this thing where, you know,

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CAJM we're a group, we have a lot of members. And so what we would do is we wanted to make sure we spoke out the comments that we had released spoke out against racial bias in policing, and really pushing for the audit to happen. You know, as constituents talking to these council members saying, we urge you to support the audit. What we do is, you know, you had a two-minute limit. So, then the person who just got done speaking, the next person would speak. And I remember Rabbi Alexander from KKBE was speaking. And, you know, we, like I said, we would pass, and they changed the rule. And so, at one point you had two minutes and you had a minute and a half. And I remember a councilman saying, you know, after the rules have been changed, are we really going to muffle the rabbi from speaking truth to power. And so, you know, we had a ton of community resistance to the out of racial bias and policing. And like I said, from Mayor Tecklenburg but then you also had it, you know, I had some congregations I work with where I had to have conversations with them on the policing because, you know, and this isn't like a hard rule, but I think that my experience with some of the folks I worked with, you know, as a white person, you may not have had this experience with a police officer, but for me, you know, I was wearing this CofC hoodie I have on right now. And when I was stopped by Charleston police on Calhoun Street walking my way to walk on my way to the library and Glebe and housing. I think it's Glade my memory's a little fuzzy, but I'm going into the Addlestone library, 24 hours. We're at the point exam season, so the library's 24 hours. I get stopped by an officer, had a book bag on my back and he says to me, you know, what are you doing in this area you fit? And I was like, you know, I'm a student. Oh, well, you know, there's been some break-ins recently. And so I just want to make sure, so it's like, you know, again, I'm wearing the CofC hoodie, I got a

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book bag on my back and I showed him my student ID to show that, you know, it was almost like I had to prove that I belonged in this area. Right? And so, I think that I have that experience. A lot of other CofC students have that a lot of black CofC students have that experience. And, you know, I think that some of the, some of the congregations I worked with and I think a lot of white people just don't have that experience because when I say that I had that experience, it's like, oh, wait, that happened? Oh, well, why do you think that happened? It was like, no, you know, this story is not, you know, it's not, it's normal for me. And it's like inside, it'd be like, you know, I wasn't surprised, but that's my lived experience. And so, you know, we had pushback from public officials. You have pushback from members and different congregations. And I said, again, that's growing pains of doing this work. I think now the mayor touts the audit, you know, and says that it's great. And that's good that he's saying that. And I think that it's always good to have that visceral truth telling of the mayor wasn't always on the side of the audit, and it took a collective of thirty plus congregations coming together and really speaking truth to power in order for this to happen.

HCJ: Right. Okay. Well, do you feel like, or do you remember feeling like in these moments you had this great feeling of success, if something good did happen or failure if it didn't— or was that just part of the job?

BC: I think in organizing a lot of times you have more setbacks and wounds, and I think that that's not an indictment on the work that you do. I think that the reality is that we're dealing with systems that have function for centuries the way they do. And I think that when you're up against that, you know, it's when you're trying to take things out of

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the natural order and it's not natural because that's the way it should happen. That's the way it's been operating that there is a lot that you have to fight against. And so I think that, you know, the policing is a good example because in the summer, and I might be mixing up my years, but I want to say in the summer of 2017, when the council first voted on the audit, it failed seven to six. But when we spent the next six months really showing how the process that the city took was wrong that the firm that they were about to hire did not have the expertise. And so, once we did that, six months later, we were able to get to the point where we showed how illegitimate the process of use was, we got the votes called zero in favor, right? And so, I remember the night when it failed feeling very defeated, I was early on in an organizing. I was not the point person on that issue. I did help and helping leaders think through council comments. And so, you know, there was part of, it was like, man, we spent the last four or five months going to the council meetings, you know, every Tuesday, five o'clock, every two weeks dealing with council and the mayor changing the rules, you know, having to find parking, thinking about paying all this stuff for this to happen. So, I think that when you organize, you know, you have a lot of those setbacks and, you know, I think, for me, I remind myself that others have been here before. I think about the Ella Bakers and I, what I say too is people will love, Dr. King, they'll say he was such an amazing person when the sad reality is because America has not changed. We're fighting the same system that he fought. And so, the work continues. And I think that, you know, organizing is often thankless work and it's work this hard. But for me, I remind myself that there's others that have been here before.

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H CJ: Yeah. That's a good way to look at it. Now I know social work like you were organizing can be so draining. So how does an organizer take care of himself and make sure, you know, his mental health is good?

BC: Yeah, I think for me it was important to create boundaries. I did not do work on Saturdays and just for me, I needed to have that space of to myself. I'm also an introvert. So like I love being around people, but the way I recharge is by myself. And so Saturdays for me was sacred me-time. But I also think, you know, I, it's easy to be kind of on-call 24-seven, but I tried to have it to where, you know, that Saturday, but also after nine o'clock, I try not to respond to anything. You know, I try to create space, being able to enjoy friends and family, staying active for me like I said, I got into karate and taekwondo for many years. So getting into that and, you know, treating that time every week for me to do that just helped with stress levels. And, you know, I think knowing that, you know, the work, you can't do this work alone, right? There's other people that get involved in this. So knowing that, knowing that I should be able to depend on my team, my team's favor depend on me. And if the work is to stop because I'm not involved, that means I have not done it, my job as an organizer, because as an organizer for me, I should be able to leave and situation of which I'm working in and the work continues because we train the people. And so, you know, knowing that they're there, there are folks working and doing this because of, you know, and when I say training them, you know, I learned from them just as much as they learn from me. And so us learning together, knowing that the work is going to continue no matter who's involved. So yeah, that, that, that's something where I think was a way that I was able to recharge it, just knowing that, you know, I don't have to take it all on my shoulders that others are doing

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this work. And that there's not one leader, there's multiple people doing this work. I think I mentioned Ella Baker, but she says that strong, strong people don't need strong leaders and what she said- and I might've paraphrased that, but her point was that you don't need one person, one charismatic person speaking on your behalf, people's got a voice they can speak. And so let us all get trained so that if for whatever reason we pass away, you know, in the case that, you know, governments have locked people up for their activism and organizing before- that the work continues. And so yeah.

HCJ: Yeah. Okay. So you've mentioned Ella Baker a couple of times. Who else is kind of your role model?

BC: You know, so I've got Angela Davis and Baldwin on my wall. I'd say James Baldwin, because I think that, I think he was a genius. I think that he had a way to articulate things quickly and not using a ton of words, but just a brilliant mind. And Angela Davis, because I think that for someone who was in prison, I'm pretty sure that was on the FBI's most wanted list because she was doing this work, had the lights of, of, I want to say when Ronald Reagan was governor of California, working to get her fired from her college where she was professor at. So, for someone to go through all this and to speak truth to power in a way she does and did for so many years. And I think the Angela Davis for me, the thing I appreciate is that she's not just concerned about what's happening in the US and I think that she understands that idea of what Dr. King say, what happens to one happens to all and injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere- that you cannot just be concerned about what's happening in Charleston, South Carolina. And so I think for me, reading Angela Davis, listening to her speeches, it broadens my

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horizons to where I'm thinking about what's happening in the US, but I'm also thinking about, you know what's happening in the Inmar, right? What's happening with Israel and Palestine, and how are marginalized people fighting an oppressive system. And not only that, but understanding how it's connected you know, the laws that were enacted in South African apartheid are very similar to general south, right? And so I think for me, Angela Davis, just making those connections makes me stretch my organizing and kind of have the intersectional approach to my organizing of- no you just can't be concerned about what you see, right? You got to understand what's happening worldwide and not to say that I'm going to be the one that go, and if I don't know these things, but I think that there's a space of being in solidarity with folks that are fighting. I think folks on the ground all over the world, they know what they're up against and being able to be in solidarity with them is important.

H CJ: Yeah, absolutely. So, I'll take us back in time a little bit. You mentioned that story where the police officer was, you know, just being awful to you on the campus. Was that a unique experience for you or have you experienced that before?

BC: That was, that was my first time being stopped by a police officer at CofC and my only time and you know, I know other black students on campus that have stopped more times. Not just once. I know other students that you know, stopped by the same officer saying the same thing. And so, it's, it's almost like it's, I think in this work, I've noticed that when you've been faced with injustice so long, you get used to it. And so, you begin to normalize things, and I think there's a threat of when you normalize it and think that this is just the way it is that it does something to you psychologically. And

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so I know many other black students that this has happened to. And we've even joked that, oh, six of us in that better not be walking together because we might get stopped. Right. And it's like, we laugh about this and, you know, we joke about it. And it's like, you know, when I think about it, that's not really a joke. Like, you know, this is something that because of, you know, society deems our blackness as a threat when it's not, we've had to operate in this way and we've changed the way that we operate versus, you know, this racist system changing the way it operates. Right? Which is why we have it that sixty-one years separates me and my grandmother, yet I'm fighting the same systems that she fought against.

HCJ: Yeah. That's absolutely interesting. Is she still living?

BC: Yeah, she's in New York in Harlem. She grew up in Columbia as well.

HCJ: Okay. So you've had these conversations with her I'm assuming- about this?

BC: I part of, for me, I think my grandmother, my mom, as well, both of them made sure that I understood. My grandmother would tell me how, when Dr. King came to Columbia when she was at- I think it was Benedict, an HBCU in Columbia that when he came to march against separate but separate, but supposedly equal facilities to how they marched with him. My grandma had also told me about how much she grew up how black kids would have to walk to school, but the white kids had a school bus. And how from the school bus of white kids would throw rocks and bricks and spit at them as they would be walking. And so, she made sure I knew early on the history, like an unvarnished history of this country. So then as I got older, you know, part of why I

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majored in political science was because when she would come down from Harlem and visit, she watched C-SPAN for fun. So, she's looking at these representatives, having this debate, the center and having this debate. And I'm just like, this is boring. As I sit and watch it with her, I'm like, oh, actually this person's talking about how you know, this is actually about the impact of my life, but, you know, we, I haven't, wasn't thinking about it. And so, yeah, she we've had these conversations and, you know, I talked to her about CAJM and work and, you know, and with the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, now there are a lot of national work, but also some state and local. And so we talk about that as well now.

HCJ: Wonderful. So, do you see CAJM changing over time or do you think it's just going to be a continuation?

BC: Changing in what way?

HCJ: In any way? I mean, the work they're doing now, do you think that'll ever change or do you think they, same social justice issues will still be relevant?

BC: Hmm. I think that you know, I tell people all the time that my goal is to organize myself out of a job, meaning that we've gotten rid of all these different injustices, that we've gotten rid of a system that prioritizes profits over people. But that's a major shift that has to happen. And so, I think that CAJM is going to continue the work that they're doing. I think that you have a group of folks that have been doing this work for- I think CAJM is at least seven or eight years old now. So you have folks that have been doing this work for a long time. And there are folks that have been doing the work

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before CAJM, I think they're going to be continuing yet. And I think that regardless of, of what's happening the amount of their problem you're working on that it's going to still be in existence. I think the people might look differently because, you know, as people get older and, you know, staff leave like, you know, the faces are different, but I think that, you know, there's a culture of accountability that is in Charleston, I think because leaders at CAJM have built that. And I think that I don't think it's going to stop. I think it's going to continue to grow. I think that, you know I guess if you want to say change, I think CAJM may be in a space of thinking through, as we continue to have more congregations and build people power in this way you know, how does the work expand, is that you doing some electoral work, which you know, there's a voter edge, there's a border education just because of what we're working on our community problems, but, you know, it could that expanded to electoral work. So, I think that it could change in that way. And that's just hypothetically just thinking through I think that what, the amount of conversations they have, you know, CAJM has been able to create a culture of accountability. And, yeah, I know we're not in person now, but the Nehemiah Action is a space where it's like, you know, public negotiations with officials and knowing that we're doing this because so many people are suffering, and we want to make the community be adjusted community. So, I think it will continue.

HCJ: Yeah. Okay. Well, speaking of leaving, you mentioned that what prompted you to leave CAJM?

BC: Yeah, so I was born and raised in Charleston. I'm 27 years old. And well, at the time I would've been twenty-six, and I would tell people the longest I've been away

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from Charleston is three weeks. And so, for me organizing in the city where I was born and raised it was good in many ways. And also, I was ready to be in a different space. And I also just got engaged- my fiancée and I wanted to live in a different- didn't want to be in the South at the moment. So, we decided to move to DC. And I also wanted to kind of going back on upon what I said about Angela Davis. I think that it was good to organize in the city where I grew up. And I also was thinking more and more about how the problems are not just relegated to Charleston alone. And I wanted to be in a space where I was able to, to understand what's happening in the US on a nation level, a nationwide level but also deepening my understanding what's happening globally. And so I was ready to do organizing work around the country, which is what I'm doing now. And it was, I was ready to have a space where I could work specifically on criminal legal reform working to transform the criminal legal system. And I think that, you know, organizing at CAJM, it wasn't like I organize on housing, but they, I could be doing another issue, like a few as well, but I wanted to work specifically in a space of organizing, they get transformed the criminal legal system, because I think for me, when you talk about housing, education, all of that is connected through the criminal legal system. If you can get changes in the criminal legal system at the nationwide level, but at the state level and local level, a lot of the problems in housing and education, they wouldn't necessarily go away, but they're still connected. Right? And so if I can get it to where we divest some of the money that we're spending in the criminal legal system or policing and dedicated to a housing trust fund or to the education system, some of these problems wouldn't exist. And so, I was ready to do some of that nationwide work. And you know, just on a personal level, I was ready to be away from Charleston, see a

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different city. Like I said, you know, I grew up, it's like, I'm seeing the same things over and over and over. So, I was ready for that. And then it's, I make just a change of pace.

You know, I still do organizing, but I'm not necessarily on the ground. And with that, you know, I've been able to have more of a work-life balance. You know, I'm still working, but I'm not working like eighty hours a week now, more like seventy hours a week now.

And so I was ready to just do that nationwide work and to kind of be in this space where I wasn't, you know, I'm still organizing, but I'm not just focused on Charleston. I'm doing work in California and Georgia, Arizona, Wisconsin, and, you know, doing stuff where it's like, we're doing a lot of this stuff with the Hill. And so for me understanding how the different priorities that we have as far as passing laws and bills in Congress and holding President Biden accountable, how does the organizing coalesce with that? And how do I navigate that? And so it's stretched me as an organizer, really it's like a puzzle. And you know, how do I put the pieces together?

H CJ: Absolutely. Well what, where are you working now?

BC: Yeah, so I'm with the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. We are a coalition of over 200 civil and human rights organizations. And it was founded in the 50s, knowing that, you know, there needed to be a coalition where, you know, so much amazing work is happening, but oftentimes it happens in the silos. So the idea was that if we had this, this coalition that really was all these organizations coming together we can make sure that there's this space that really works to get these changes. And so my role, as I said, as working with a criminal the justice program, working to transform the criminal legal system and, you know, I participate in our task force, do stuff on the

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Hill, just understanding what's happening on the Hill. But my number one priority is to coordinate our organizing efforts at the national state and local level.

H CJ: Okay. So, do you feel like coordination of those things is different regionally or no?

BC: Coordination of the, the Hill work or—

H CJ: Anything you're doing.

BC: What I will say that you know, what we work on in Arizona may not be the same as what we work on in Georgia, right? Different legislatures, you've got you know, different grassroots work that has been happening. And so that looks different now, I will say the tenants of organizing- that doesn't change. However, you know, what's being worked on, how we navigate that, the issues we face might be a little bit different because there's different geographically and different state legislatures.

H CJ: Okay. Okay. And do you feel like the virtual world and the zoom world of the COVID era has changed the look of your work?

BC: It's definitely, I haven't met any of my staff and any of my colleagues yet in person. Working with Leadership Conference since November. So that's like, okay, we may not be in the office this year, so it'll probably be over a year until I meet folks. And so it has changed some things you know, I think normally I would be traveling to one of these places like eras, Arizona, Georgia to meet folks on the ground. And that's just not going to happen for a long time. I think that, you know, I've been still able to do my work

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but you know, in-person being able to just go get coffee with somebody, they get the note about why that's happening via zoom. And I think a lot of people are having Zoom fatigue. And so that's something where it's like, that's changed the work a little bit. But we've been able to continue to work and I'm actually, you know, I'm speaking from a place of privilege of not having to go in person into a job location. I've been able to, you know, I can work anywhere that I have internet access. So, but yeah, it has changed that that just in-person feel.

H CJ: Okay. And you're based, where are you based from right now?

BC: I'm in DC.

H CJ: Okay. Okay. What's something you would have told younger Brandon before going into all of this kind of work?

BC: That's a good question. Don't sweat the small stuff. And what I mean by that is that organizing you're not going to get everything right. And so for me, I often focus on what I'm not doing well before I focused on what I'm doing well. And so I think the, the advice is don't sweat the small stuff and breathe.

H CJ: Yeah.

BC: Give yourself a chance to breathe because of work. You're not going to get these changes in a day. So was like, don't sweat, the small stuff. Breathe. And I think over everything else, prioritize self-care, because if you're not in a healthy space and that'd be mentally, physically, spiritually, you're not going to be ready for the work. And

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so make sure that do what you need to do in order to be recharged to make sure that you're in a great place to do the work. So I think those three. Anything else- don't be afraid of change. I think, you know and I say that as I've made a move to a different city, different jobs, so same career, but different job which is don't be afraid of change.

H CJ: Okay. So either with your last job or your current job, what is the most memorable either project or experience what sticks out as memorable to you?

BC: The question I think I think the most memorable I have would be the night that—I think it's November of 2017 Charleston approved the audit. And that was because of the work that community members I did. And I think that's most memorable for me because I think that when you had this work had started in the fall of 2016, if I'm getting my years right. And so from 2016, and so then you had all these, you had, it was a fight. And so seeing these community members, particularly black community members who for so many, so many years and decades had seen police system of policing where it was like, you know, cause you're a black person with a fancy car, or in my case, walking in the street you'd be stopped just because you're black, to see this audit go through. That was something that was a memorable for me. And then, I think that, you know in the housing work that I did, there's not a specific point, but I think that, I always think about that work because I worked with nine leaders from these different congregations. And we had to sift through the stories that were told about the housing crisis identify the problem and find a solution. And so, you know, and it was, it was an interesting thing because I was working with Dr. Claire Curtis, who was my capstone professor for Poli Sci. And then eight months later, well, I guess it would have been a year and a half later, we're

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working on a committee together and she's like, stop calling me, doctor, call me Claire now. So she is at the point where it was like, she was like, yeah, I'm not your professor anymore. You just call me Claire. So, you know, working with leaders like that, and like Claudette Hart for Morris Brown AME who was a coach here on this housing steering committee and really getting to know them and just being in this fight with them together was something that I'll keep with me as.

H CJ: Yeah, that's wonderful. So what keeps you busy these days, Brandon? Just work?

BC: Yeah. Well, I will say that you know, DC, some things are opened up, but of course we're still in the pandemic. And so I find myself, you know, my fiancée and I, like I said, we moved here. We go on walks to explore the city a lot. I walk my dog a ton. You know, we will go outside to a restaurant, just to be mindful of social distancing and everything. And so it's been good to be able to, you know, DC being shut down and traffic not being as bad as it would have been. I've been able to explore to state a little bit more. And you know, for the most part, when the weekends, I Friday usually start off around 5:30, six o'clock weekends. It's like, I wake up on Saturdays and Sundays now where it's like, I, I get stuff done, but it's like, I don't necessarily have a specific plan. Right. And so, you know, I get up and, you know, slowly get a cup of coffee and read and do things like that. Yeah. That's what keeps me busy these days.

H CJ: Yeah. Well, what do you see in your future? Do you think you're always going to do this kind of work?

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BC: Yeah, I think so. I think that for me, I think every generation has, has you know, Coretta Scott King and I'm paraphrasing here, but she, she basically said that every generation has to buy different freedom. And I think that I'm reminded that, you know, folks like Malcolm X and Dr. King were assassinated, and RFK was assassinated. And you know, the systems they were fighting are the systems we're fighting. And so I think I will always in some way, shape, or form be a part of this work, whether that be me organizing, whether that'd be me going to law school and fighting in the courts. I think I'll always be in this fight in some way, shape, or form. And again, like I said, the job is, you know, to organize or to get to the point where I don't need to do this, that we don't need to do this. It'd be amazing. That'd be all right. We've eradicated racism and homophobia and xenophobia and created a system in which people can live their life, regardless of who they choose to love, regardless of their faith tradition, regardless of their skin color. And they can actually just go have a hobby or go do things where it's like their job is whatever brings them joy. That's not connected to fighting injustice. And so if that happens, I don't know what I'd be doing, but maybe be like some kind of coffee taster or something like that. You know, if we can eradicate these systems of injustices, you know, I go do something else, but until that I'm going to be in a fight until we get to that point.

HCJ: Absolutely. Well, I think you've done wonderful work, and thank you for all the work you've done. Do you have anything else you want to add?

BC: No. I think that thank you so much for reaching out to me. I think that you know, Charleston is in a space where we can be, we can show what it looks like to not only tell the truth, but to be about enacting the laws and policies that is connected to that

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truth-telling and dealing with the vestiges of enslavement and creating a community in which, you know capitalism doesn't put it to where we prioritize profits over people. And so, you know, I think that the fight has to continue in Charleston, and it serves us no purpose about our tone. We've got to tell the truth, we can be respectful, but I think oftentimes the call for respect happens when you still tell them the truth. And I'm not about that. I don't think, you know where I'm, where I'm at the organization I work for isn't about that, and CAJM isn't about that as well.

H CJ: Yeah, absolutely. Well, thank you. I'm going to turn off the recording now.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

Transcriber: Hannah Cowan Jones

Date: April 12, 2021

MLL 5/5/2021