TRANSCRIPT – ERICA COKLEY

Interviewee: ERICA COKLEY

Interviewer: OLIVIA WILLIAMS

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OLIVIA WILLIAMS: Okay. So, first, I want to say that I'm here with Erica Cokley. It's October 21 of 2020, and we'll go ahead and get started. So, first, I kind of just want to know where you're from, and your upbringing, and all of that.

ERICA COKLEY: My name is Erica Cokley. Born and raised in Columbia, South Carolina. I am forty years. I graduated from Brookland Cayce High School. Graduated in '98. I was actually raised more by my dad. Mom really wasn't so much in the picture, you know?

So, school life growing up was really hard. I do have a sister and a brother. My only brother was actually murdered six years ago. So, life has just been—it's been, like, a struggle. School was my getaway, my indulgence. I had my first son two weeks before I graduated from high school. I graduated from Brookland Cayce High School in Columbia—in Cayce, South Carolina.

I just always felt like it was just, to me, honestly, I felt like I've just been kind of out there because mom wasn't there. Dad wasn't there. I always really felt like I didn't belong anywhere, so I always indulged in school. I moved down here in Charleston. I've been down here about fifteen, sixteen years. So, after I had my son, I just kind of worked. That's all I've really known how to do was work and just, you know, make sure that I

have everything I needed for him.

I did go to Strayer for two years. Have an associate in business management. Always kind of just wanted to own my own business but never really having the funds to do it myself. Just kind of just, you know, you work, you just work. And I was working at Taco Bell, actually, when I met the people that started the Fight for 15. So, in the last year or so, because everything I've been through, my nonprofit, Voices United, was something that because I've always volunteered in the community, I always wanted to just give back, always felt like I was empowered to just—there was a reason, you know, to just help people because I was that kid, and there wasn't anyone there for me, and I just always felt like I wanted to just always help and give back.

Well, 2020 just put a really big spin on everybody, and it's just—it's even weird that I'm having this conversation because I remember I didn't know why, just 2020 was just different, and I just knew a year ago, things that I've gone through, I was like, you know what? I'm just going to go ahead and go for it. I want to go ahead and get my nonprofit together. I want to go ahead and start helping. I want to go ahead and start giving back. COVID, Kobe, George Floyd, and even in the midst of everything happening, I, you know, I witnessed, the things that I've witnessed just in general, was almost like every time I've wanted to say something, I just stepped back, but then every time I would step back, something else would happen, and it actually almost started to get scary, just real life scary.

So, fast forward. When I did, I was like, you know what? Go big or go home. I saw that video of George Floyd, and not having my mom there, understanding how it was to cry out as a child and no one answer, I just felt like I needed to, like it was my duty to

call together women. Like I said, I was that child. Not having a mom, I didn't know. We can't continue to teach what we don't know how to do, and that's the thing that I keep saying, so not having a mother there, not knowing how to know what it was like being pregnant, not knowing what it's like to have a child. I knew I needed to love and protect my children, but what else comes with that, you know?

OW: Right.

EC: So, it's a learning process, and I called together. It's like I said, we, generation after generation, we are having these children, and if we're not learning or accepting and realizing the brokenness or the things that are happening to us that we are passing on to our children, then it's just gonna be generations after generations of broken children and things that are happening right now.

OW: Absolutely.

EC: And I've always just been this parent or just this person to say, you know, there's no such thing as bad children. You know, I just feel like we fall in situations that if we don't build that foundation and secure that foundation for them, then that's where we lose sight, and I could have been that child. I would have been that child, but school was my getaway. School was where I overindulged, and it was how I kept myself comfortable, but, at the same time, I was bullied. I was teased. I was ostracized, I felt like, by teachers because I made As and Bs, and it was always like, "Who are you cheating off of," or, "Why are you cheating?" And then I was sat in corners, and it just didn't—it wasn't right.

I watched my black friends fall off. I watched my learning materials be different, as I was with my white counterparts, but I can tell people it didn't matter to me then, but

now that I noticed, it's like I self-taught myself. It's like I'm here, but I don't have to teach you, and again, that was not right. So, I said you always have to listen to the voices of the children. You know, we have to be the voices, and we're making these decisions, and no one is, you know, worrying about the effects that it's having on children, ultimately.

So, that march, women, all women, everyone, race, ethnicity, everyone who relates, you know, these are our children. How can we come together and heal? You know, we heal. We nurture. And so, I just wanted to figure out to be able to do that. And again, with everything that's happening right now in the world that we all know, you know, that, you know, people of color, we are the most marginalized. You know, women, we are the most marginalized, but the African American woman is the most.

And like I told people, when I did that march, it was in empowerment of all women and every woman, but I want to make sure that they understand that it was an amplification of black and brown women because we've been saying this. Our children have been saying this. So, right now, I want people to realize that right now is the time to make sure that the eyes and ears of the ones that are open, we make sure that we keep them open.

OW: Absolutely. So, your shirt, "Rise, Sister, Rise," is that from the march?

EC: Yes, ma'am, that's from the march. That's been my motivation. That's been my pick me up, keep me going, because we want to see the next generation of sisters rise.

OW: Absolutely. I'm just going to pause this for a second and make sure that I'm actually—.All right. So, we left off talking a little bit about, you know, why you do what you do? You said that you've seen a lot of things, and those things, if you're comfortable

talking about them, or if you're not, either way, I'm just curious. It sounds like that has had a direct impact on basically the school board, the Women's March, the Fight for 15. Do you want to go into a little bit of detail?

EC: Yeah, 'cause right now is the time to make your voice be heard, and that's why Voices United is the name of my nonprofit. I've always felt like people, children respectfully, everyone had the right to have their voices heard. So, I came up with an acronym. Like, it was, like, a long time ago that we should always be able to verbally express our input concerning everything. You know, v-o-i-c-e, voices. We should always be able to express how we're feeling because, as a child and the things that I endured, nobody was listening.

I was abused by my mother in the beginning, child abuse. So, then there was sexual abuse from as early as I can remember from family members. And then I remember my dad getting married, and then it was, like, so, you know, just abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect. I definitely know that there was neglect because mom wasn't there. Dad was a worker that provide but nothing else. And that's why I always tell people it's that emotional and those social connections that we're missing with our babies, that not just us, because we are having them and going back to work, but society is placing on us because we have to.

And after I had my son, and my son was diagnosed with autism, it was just, like, more of a fight to be heard, to make parents see the ultimate effect that we do have on our children no matter what it is that we do or don't do. And so, that's my fight for all children, you know? That's my fight for all women because I want us to know that there are things, and even men, when we think about they're supposed to be so tough and so

strong, but we're human. So, emotions are human.

OW: Absolutely.

EC: So, the toxicity and the traumas that we're generationally passing on to our children we have to stop. You know, having my children already knowing friends that they've buried, you know, it's sad. We shouldn't be happy when our children make it to be twenty-two. It shouldn't be a sigh of relief. That should be something normal, and I keep saying we all have started to normalize and accept things that are not normal.

OW: Absolutely.

EC: And we start to do away with the things that we should be embracing like respect, and family values, and trust. And so, just realizing, you know, at first, you think it's just you, and then I came across this—a friend gave me something. I think it was Dr. Nadine Harris or Dr. Nadine someone about ACEs, and when I read that, it's like a light bulb went off in my head, and it was like an aha moment to where I knew that it wasn't just me, that I knew, you know, like, it was like a weight lifted off my shoulders, and then I just knew my way then. You know, just wanted to talk to people, trying to help people, and I just knew that that's where it all came from. And then you read about the part about being resilient.

So, some type of way, I did find myself to be resilient enough to, you know, bounce back. Even though I had children out of wedlock, I was still able to have a son and make sure that he graduated high school and not succumb to the streets. I was still able to, you know?

OW: Mm-hmm.

EC: So, when I tell people that, like they say, it ain't what they call you, it's what

you answer to, and I've always said it ain't where you started. It's where you end up.

OW: Exactly.

EC: And even in society, you know, when people used to say, "Well, when you're going through something, there's always somebody else going through something worse." To me, that wasn't anything that made me feel better, you know? Like, we should be trying to figure out a way to not allow the next person to be going through something else that's worse than what we're going through.

OW: Absolutely. I complete agree with you, and I love your passion towards just helping children because, I mean, I don't have children, but I do have a niece, and I like to do the same for her just to hope that she, you know, doesn't have to go through the things that I went through.

EC: There you go.

OW: I had a great upbringing. My parents are some of the best people in the world, but it's not —like you said, it's society.

EC: There you go.

OW: So, at home, she's good, with my sister and my parents, but what worries me is outside and going to these schools and into this public space. I'm not familiar with Charleston County Schools. I'm not actually from Charleston, so I'm just curious, like, why the school board. Is it because of how things are within Charleston County Schools?

EC: To me, it's just the way things are within South Carolina public school systems. Period.

OW: Got you.

EC: I'm a product of South Carolina public school system, and even when I was

growing up as a kid, I used to tell people—I used to honestly feel like—I said, “We” —I compared us to the Flintstones, and everybody else were the Jetsons.

OW: Mm-hmm. Oh, that's good.

EC: And I try to make people understand that if I was using that same synonym back then, just imagine. I was a kid, and I was saying that. I had family that would come down north, and they’d be like, “You're just learning that?” I swear I felt like people—you know, I said it. They get smart. They send their books down here to us, and then we learn stuff.

I never understood how we were always the first to break away from the nation. You know, we were the first. We’re always the first in the things that we don’t need to be, but we’re always the last in everything that we want to be.

OW: I think we’re towards the bottom for education. Correct?

EC: We’ve been in the bottom 50th ever since I can remember, and I’m forty.

OW: Me, too, because I’m a product of the public schools in South Carolina, as well.

EC: And I’m wondering what happened, you know? And so, even when I went to school, like I said, predominantly white school, but, again, I was ignored, but I was there, and I was one of those kids that I, like I said, I made myself fit in, but I wasn’t white enough for that side, and I was too white for that side. I was a cheerleader. I was in dance. I took gymnastics. You know, I never heard people telling me, “Oh, that's for white people,” and I’m going, really? No, it's actually for anybody who decides to do it.

OW: Absolutely.

EC: And that's the stigma that they placed on us and that they make us believe.

Just like running for the school board, “What makes you qualified?” What makes you qualified to ask me that question?

OW: Now, that's a good question because that question is just as important. If anything, who are they to judge?

EC: Exactly. So, you know, also, product of —being a product of public school systems, coming into Charleston, I was here fifteen, sixteen years first time I came here, coming through Mount Pleasant, or, excuse me, off the interstate, so you see what, Summerville, first?

OW: Mm-hmm.

EC: And you're looking at that, and it's like, ahh, and it's like the closer you got to North Charleston and downtown, I was like, ooh.

OW: I’m still like that.

EC: And I can’t even believe all you have to do, is go across a bridge or across a block and already know what’s going on in the neighborhood, and it's not right. So, I’ve always been involved with schools, PTA, student improvement councils, and the only thing I can tell people right now is, like, I remember when the Burns—it is now the Meeting Street Academy on Dorchester Road. I remember when my son, who is twenty-two, he went to that school. I walked him across that street from (00:15:17 Spur Street?) where we lived. My son didn't bring home books because they didn't have the resources. They had to share.

OW: Wow.

EC: I’ve been to that school, and I watch rats roll through the building and the paint chip off the wall. Look at it now.

OW: That's a very nice school. It's a nice building, Meeting Street Academy. That's true.

EC: And so, again, I remember when I have nieces where their cousins when to James Simons and Brentwood, and then I remember when they closed those schools, and they opened that prison. And what I did was, I took my son in my car, and I drove him there, and I told him that window of opportunity that Charleston County Public System is trying to open for you, we're going to put some nails in it, and we're going to nail it shut, son, because I had already refused to allow the streets to have my son, and I meant that. I meant that. I was able to get him into a charter school, and that's where I learned, okay, charter schools is better. No.

And that's what I want people to see now, that when we jump onto something, and now that we know going forward charter schools, the way it's taking away from our public schools, the resources that we've already known, and I've already —you know, my kid, I told my kids years ago. You can ask them. I told them these schools were going —they were going back to segregation slowly but surely right before our eyes. I said they've been dummying you down for the longest, and I said they're preparing you to do nothing but work and clean up behind them for the rest of your life, and that's why I started to tell them to think outside of what they were teaching them, and I started to look, and within the schools, I started paying attention. Oh, title one, title one, title one.

Again, white is always right. No, it's not. Then they keep saying that black and brown and poor communities—the fact that I had my son or my children, we were —and I felt like that, you know? So, we stayed West of the Ashley, which is more mixed black and white but predominantly white. So, we're in predominantly white schools, but the

education is not just—is not any better. But the thing that nobody was paying attention to, is that the same title one schools in predominantly black neighborhoods, they were closing them, but they weren't closing those white neighborhoods, and that's what I kept trying to scream at everybody.

I'm going like, hey. Even with the charter and the problems that I was having, like I said, calling people, bus issues, my kids are playing like Frogger, getting hit by cars, about to, because they won't stop for the school bus, and it's because of funding, and it's the lack of resources. But I'm going, so what are y'all doing with the money? And that's what made me start going, like, okay, and I'm telling parents, if nobody else has paid attention—I went to school. We went to neighborhood schools, and we all started from here, and we went to these middle schools, and we all ended up at one, or two, or three high schools.

I came here to Charleston, and I'm going, y'all have this many schools, elementary. You have this many middle schools, but you got this many high schools. I'm going, what the hell happened to your kids? Excuse me.

OW: Mm-hmm. No, that's okay.

EC: Like, where did your kids go?

OW: Mm-hmm. You're absolutely right.

EC: I keep trying to make them see that the gerrymandering, gentrification, all of this stuff is so real.

OW: Oh, yeah, mm-hmm.

EC: And that's why I cannot continue to sit quietly anymore. In the little bit of time that I'm [00:18:51], I've been where I'm at on Johns Island for five years. We were

the first set of apartments to go up. Right now, as we speak, oh, the other apartments or townhomes, they were already going up. I remember I used to walk my child back there, and there was nothing. Now, I walk my child back there, and I'm walking through a neighborhood.

OW: I actually cut through Johns Island to get home, and I tell people, I'm like, I remember when Johns Island was just nothing, and now there's apartments and townhomes.

EC: And if you see that in your little bit of time of life, and if we're not paying attention, all you see are hotels going up.

OW: Oh, especially downtown.

EC: Hotels going up and that's why I say they're not teaching us anything, and that's why. We can work in the hotels, but you won't teach us how to own them. You won't teach us how to operate them. You won't teach us how to create our own.

OW: Absolutely. I think a point you made earlier about you have to think outside of what you've been taught, is so important because a lot of what I know now happened in the last four or five years, not when I was college, not when I was in high school, but by my own research and my own understanding because they're not—you know, again, being a product of South Carolina Schools, you—they don't teach you what you need to know.

EC: They've taught us what they wanted us to know.

OW: Exactly.

EC: And that's what I've always told people. You know, when they're doing this right here, you have to look and see what they're doing behind your back because that's

what's been happening, and I've always been that kid to ask. And even in school, you know, I told my kids I've always made honor roll, As and Bs. I knew I was a smart kid. I could also be smart at the mouth, too, but they couldn't do anything to me because I was smart.

I wasn't, like, bad smart. I would ask questions. Like, well, why can they, and I can't? And they didn't have an answer for that. So, of course, I would probably be aggressive, or I'd probably be whatever, but—you know?

OW: Yeah. I'm a curious person, too, so I understand.

EC: And I think it was a quote that my daughter—and it was something recent. Like you said, you know, everything that we learn. What was it? What was it? What was it? Okay. In school, we review for a test. What is it? In school, we learn a lesson. How is it? We're taught a lesson, and we're given a test, but, in life, we learn that—we're given a test, and we learn a lesson. So, it's like you're tested first, and then you learn your lesson in life, but, in school, you know, it's like they're giving it to you, and then, all of a sudden, you're tested, but, in life, you just go through it, right?

OW: You just get the test first.

EC: Yeah. You get to go through it, and that's what I'm telling people. So, like, when they're asking me, "What makes you qualified," I've lived through it already. I can speak for it, number one. And even if you don't know it, you can learn it as you go because, right now, obviously, they're not doing something right that's been making us go around in this circle all this time, too.

OW: Absolutely, and I think that's such a good point that lived experience, to me, that's more important than going to law school or going to any type of, like, higher

learning. You know, you know this. You have children who, I assume, go to these schools here in Charleston. Who better to serve on this school board than somebody who sees it day in and day out? And how many children do you have?

EC: I have three. My oldest is twenty-two, my only daughter is seventeen, and my awesome kiddo is seven years old. I say, “awesome,” you know, because he has autism, and I tell people you haven't been a parent until you’ve parented a child with autism, and he’s the one that actually gave me all my self-reevaluation and reflection. Like, each one of my children did teach me something different. Having my first son, you know, like I said, I knew I’d have to go out and work. I knew I needed to provide a place to stay. I knew I wasn’t supposed to abuse him and hurt him, and I knew I wasn’t going to let nobody hurt my baby, you know?

The little girl came, and it's like, oh, what am I doing? Like, seriously, I was like, what do I do with you? Like, I knew I had to make her pretty and give her bows, and I knew I had to make sure I keep her clean, and she was a tomboyish little girl, but it was okay. I’m like, come here, you're too cute, but, you know, and then I got my awesome kiddo. So, then it is, like, all over again. Like, what do you do? You know, but I enjoyed every moment, and, right now, and that's why I feel like I’m able to tell people, you know, we have to listen to these kids.

OW: Absolutely.

EC: Like, we come here equipped. All we have to do, is define what it is that they have, and we define it by giving them the necessary tools, and that's what’s happening in school when you are getting there and when we’re not getting those necessary right when we need them. And they say when you don’t use them, you lose them, right?

OW: Mm-hmm.

EC: And that's why I'm so hard on them about my kid right now because he speaks Spanish. He's wanting to learn, and it's like no, but don't wait until they get in third grade or fourth grade because when he's telling you no then, that's when you're going to have the problem.

OW: Exactly.

EC: And that's why I'm not happy with the mission critical and the things in the plans that they're trying to do because these children are in ninth and tenth grade. If you think they're failing now, if you put them someplace else that people are more academically inclined, what do you think that does to our self-esteem?

OW: Absolutely right. You said, "Mission critical?"

EC: That's what made me start honing more so on the school board. So, mission critical agenda, it's something that was happening before COVID where they were or there are thirteen schools that are in predominantly black neighborhoods they're trying to close.

OW: Got you. So, they fall under that mission critical agenda or —okay, and are there any white neighborhood schools that are on this? That's really interesting. Huh. And are those schools in a specific region, or they're kind of all over?

EC: North Charleston, all North Charleston.

OW: Okay, I figured, but I just wanted to makes sure.

EC: Mm-hmm, all North Charleston.

OW: And your seven-year-old, he goes to school on Johns Island?

EC: And I'm not even ashamed to say it because people are like, well, that's

taking money from there, too, but this is what we have. He has autism. He's in a Montessori program right now, and even right now, I'm not even thinking that this is something that is equipped for him. And then he's in a new school, new environment. Because of COVID, you didn't get to meet anybody before you got there.

OW: Right.

EC: It's like I just tossed my kid in this school. Like, I don't even feel happy about this right now. I don't. I haven't felt happy about my kids' education in Charleston since they have really been here, which is why I'm running because I've been following this, the safety issues, the late buses, you know, not being picked up on time, not being dropped off on time. And, you know, when it becomes to mean safety, that's when you really have to step up and start saying something. And right now, it's more so safety right now on top of education, of course, but you know?

OW: Because that's important getting just from point A to point B. If that's not happening, then you can't -- you know, there's no telling what else is actually going on if you can't even rely on the buses to get where they're supposed to be. Wow.

EC: And that's why I told people even before, which is ironic, like you say. You know, when you're calling about why the buses aren't here on time, it's because they're short of staff, and they're short of staff because they aren't paying people enough. Well, you know what I told people way back when Fight for 15 first started? It's not just fast food people.

OW: Uh-uh. It's not.

EC: It's not just McDonald's.

OW: Uh-uh. It's funny you say that because everything comes full circle. It's like

all your work is just in this perfect circle whether it be schools connecting to people not getting paid enough.

EC: Yes, ma'am, and I told them because it does not take a rocket scientist to realize that poverty and education goes hand in hand.

OW: It absolutely does, which goes back to what schools are being shut down and what areas.

EC: And that's why I said give them the fifteen dollars. If you're in ninth and tenth grade, you think they're not—come on. Give them some trade. Give them some skills. Give them something now if you think it's too late. So, even if it's now too late, and they get out of school, you're really going to still make them work for seven and eight dollars an hour? I've worked with people, and I've heard them say, "I'd rather go sell drugs," and I used to tell them that's exactly what the system wants.

OW: Exactly.

EC: But, at the same time, there's nothing else that I can offer them to make them change their mind.

OW: You're absolutely right, and it's always interesting when people say, "Oh, people who work at McDonald's, they don't deserve $15," and that's always an interesting argument to me because I'm like why because 7.25 is not a livable wage. I made 7.25 when I was seventeen years old, and when I'm seventeen, I'm living at home. It's okay. I'm twenty-seven now, 7.25, I'd be homeless.

EC: And they're thinking, well, it's just building block. It's a steppingstone. It's this. It's that. I said, "Well, okay, so, is McDonald's only supposed to be open the kids are out of school?" Let's think about that one, number one. Number two, steppingstone. I've

worked with people who worked making $25, $30 an hour. Husbands left them. This happened, da-da-da-da-da, and guess where they're working at. McDonald's.

OW: It's like your worth is determined by what you do, and it's interesting that if, you know, you were to say, "Oh, I worked at McDonald's," people would, you know, scrunch up their face, or they're like, "Oh, how could you do" —I've worked in food and bev, and I feel like we all have done it and especially in this economy.

EC: And I tell people, when you think about food and bev, and when you go into restaurants, and when you go into anyplace, first of all, we always think that we're doing the work, and nobody else is doing that work. I don't care what type of job you have. So, when we think about the people who are working at McDonald's and when we think -- and I said I always tell people I've been behind the counter, and I've been on the other side of the counter. So, when you go to McDonald's, and it's two o'clock, whatever, and you got to get there, and you need five Happy Meals, you need this, you need that, you need this, and you're going there, and you get your food, and your family is happy, right, you couldn't have did that, that fast.

OW: Uh-uh. I worked at fast food place before, too.

EC: And that's what I tell people. You couldn't have done that, that fast. You know, and not even that. Oh, it's just cooking burgers and cooking fries. After COVID, I've asked people, do you know the internal cooking temperature of a hamburger patty? And if you don't know the answer to that, I'm going to need you to go pat them people at McDonald's on the back because you ain't went home and threw up after you ate your burger.

OW: That's true.

EC: Not to mention, when you go to McDonald's, do you see poo in the toilets when you walk in there? Go in there and pat them people that's cooking your burgers on the back because they make sure that it wasn't in there and still managed to give your burger that didn't make you sick without having poo on their hands. Why? Okay.

OW: And I totally agree with you. I know firsthand. I remember when I worked at Arby's. We weren't just slicing roast beef. We were making sure that the floors were clean.

EC: Yes.

OW: And the things we were touching were clean, and we were clean. So, yeah. I'm glad you made that point because people who have not done it or think they're above it, they—and another thing, people think it couldn't be them. I think that's it, like you said.

EC: That's with a lot of stuff that's going on in the world right now, and I just hate to say it. You know, I seen a man on the corner last week. He needed money. "Sir, what do you need?" First of all, it was a man. Secondly, white man. Did I have a problem with it? No.

Took him, got him something to eat, put him in a hotel room out of my pocket. It's one of those things. When it was us, when it's black people, they're just looking at you. You need to pull yourself up by the bootstraps. Now, when it's white people, you know they're walking around thinking this never was going to happen to me.

OW: Absolutely.

EC: Yeah, it can happen to anybody.

OW: Anybody, you're absolutely right, and I think that's a really good point,

especially here in Charleston, because, as you know, everyone looks down.

EC: Especially here in Charleston. When they're always talking about the homeless people downtown and the homeless people, I tell them, “Look, you all got homeless West of Ashley and on Johns Island.” I said, “Talk about those poor people on Folly Beach, too, because I’ve given the homeless people on Folly Beach something to eat, so there’s homeless people everywhere.”

OW: But it seems like they're just focused in on downtown.

EC: Of course, of course, of course.

OW: Absolutely.

EC: I’ve told people, you know, COVID leveled playing field.

OW: Oh, yes.

EC: And it's opened the eyes, and that's why I want people to know, but, at the same time, it's like we’ve been eating pork and beans and weenies. We’ve been catching the buses to work. Black people have been resilient enough to make a paycheck stretch.

OW: Absolutely, and one thing I love to talk about with my work here is that black people used to be the majority in Charleston because people, you know, tourists will come and be like, “We don’t see many black people,” and I’m like, “Well, let me tell you why.”

EC: We are, and we still are, and I say that because that's why the crime rate is higher because we still are. That's why our expulsion rates are higher, because we still are. And that's why I say, right now, our curriculum, political, school, education, nothing fits the community, which is why everything we do and say is wrong because we’re still a majority, and we’re making them uncomfortable.

OW: Absolutely, which is interesting, and I liked your point about Mount Pleasant or over the bridge because every time I go there, I'm so uncomfortable.

EC: So, even just talking about that, me and my friend that's running for school board, because all the polling locations are open now, and it makes me sad that you even —that we feel this way. So, West Ashley, Downtown, I tried Downtown by the library the other day. I'm the only black —well, there's two of us that are black, the other two are white running for West Ashley, but I'm the only one that's black that's actually out there right now because the other one is a teacher. So, I went Downtown to the library, and, you know, I tried a few times, and I called Francis, and I'm like, "Look." I was like, "I don't even feel comfortable down here." It's like they make you just feel really out of place, which is why I don't go Downtown at all.

And so, he called me, and he was West Ashley, and he was like, "Look, there's no white people over here." He was like, "I think maybe we should switch." And you shouldn't have to feel that way. And so, the other young lady, she was like, Mount Pleasant, and we were on a call, and she was like, "Erica, I don't ever want you" —I'm like, "Look, if you feel comfortable over there, and you're white," I said, "I don't ever want to go over there either." I said, "And that's crazy."

OW: Mm-hmm because that's just as much for us as it is for them, but I don't go Downtown unless I have to, so I understand. I completely understand. Something I do want to talk about, just to circle back, you said that when you were working at Taco Bell, that's what first kind of got you involved with Fight for 15. So, I'm just kind of interested as to what sparked it.

EC: Some guys came in. They were like, "Hey," and they honestly —it was a trip.

It was like, “You want to go?” I forgot where we went. I was like, “What’s it about?” They told me what it was about. I’m like, “Okay, cool.” I think I’ve always, like I said, just always been outspoken. We went on a trip. I watched the rally. That was the first time that I learned about civil disobedience. Came back. We marched. We rallied a little bit. We just did it. I just did it, I mean, because I do feel like we deserve more.

OW: Absolutely.

EC: You know, I’ve always been that parent where I’ve had, like, two and three jobs, like, working pregnant, you know, and just it—and I needed people to see that. And so, I’m just kind of mad that it died down just a little bit the way it did, and I just don’t think they had -- you know, I think if they had a hundred of me as passionate behind it, you know, but I just don’t even really feel like some people believe that things like that can happen. So, you know, that's why I created my own nonprofit to try to just work with the other people that already have theirs by, you know, embracing other people. You know, just trying to give. If I can’t reach that person, then maybe I can reach the next one, you know?

OW: Absolutely.

EC: So, if it's not through Fight for 15 and be through Voices United, then so be it. You know, if it's through me running for the school board, then so be it, and if it's through me, you know, going to a vigil because I lost my brother to gun violence, and I’m expressing that with somebody else, then so be it.

OW: So, I imagine that losing your brother to gun violence also has sparked some of this activism in you, as well.

EC: Yes, ma’am. You got to be the change you want to see. My brother left seven

children here.

OW: Oh, wow.

EC: And two I know, you know, but we all know how life happens. We know how life has happened now and to know that the other five that I may never, ever get a chance, it's like what I can do to make sure that in some type of way that this world is positive enough for them to not be devoured like some of the other ones that I already know? So, if I can't reach within my own, then North Charleston, and downtown, Colleton County, you know?

OW: Wow. I'm going to pause it for just a second. There we go. So, what's next? You know, you're running for school board but, you know, another women's march in the making?

EC: Yes, definitely. We're going to stay on top of that. That women's march, like we said, we don't want it to be something just a one-time thing. We do want it to be something to become like a movement. We do want women to rise up to the next level. Women lead, too, you know, and we want to be able to teach them, and mold them, and shape them. And, you know, learning a thing about politics and stuff right now, as I'm learning, even if we don't know or trust the ones that we have right now, now is the time for us to start shaping and molding our own.

So, next women's march, yes, we will be doing one a year, you know, anniversary from the one that we did on Labor Day. The seventeenth, we'll probably do another one then, but three months, six months. You know, we're trying to, because everything has been election wise right now, was trying to do, like, a trunk or treat or something for Halloween, but because it is so new, come next year, we're going to make sure we have,

like, a monthly calendar for things to do. But we have right now, we're connected on Facebook and Instagram, and we have an email to where, you know, where when we did our last event, you could sign up, so we can send out emails for our next events, but that's what we want to start doing. We want to start connecting, and it wasn't a million this time, and it wasn't a million the second time, but we're going to reach a million women.

OW: Especially right now, just I feel like women, especially black women, are — and they're just at the forefront right now, leading these—I mean, that's not new. Black women have been leading movements in the charge for, I mean, centuries, but have you gotten any opposition? Have you gotten any pushback?

EC: Of course.

OW: And just for the record, who has been the biggest opponent of this?

EC: I'm not a name pointer.

OW: Oh, of course.

EC: I don't point fingers. I tell people, you know, I don't like to get down and dirty and sling the mud.

OW: Absolutely.

EC: Like, if people have to do that to rise above you, you know, go for it. I said, win or lose, in life, either which way it go, as long as I know that I've done it fairly, as long as I know that I've connected with the right people to have the exposure or to—you understand?

OW: Absolutely.

EC: And it's not even about being exposed, but as long as I've done the right thing to make the right connections, then it doesn't even matter what anybody else says.

OW: That's true.

EC: Because if they're talking about you, that means you're making some noise, and they're thinking about you.

OW: Exactly.

EC: ‘Because when I woke up this morning, I woke up. I wiped the side of my mouth. I went and washed my face. You understand what I’m saying? Like, look, and I tell my daughter that all the time. She goes, “Mom, mom,” I was like, “Baby, well, what time was that?”

I said, “Them people made you mad. They walked off three hours ago,” I said, “And three hours later, you’re still upset. Stop letting people harbor stuff into your heart.”

OW: Absolutely, and I know a popular saying right now is, living in your head rent free.

EC: Rent free, that was from—yes, ma’am.

OW: And that's something I have to work on myself.

EC: Yeah.

OW: So, it's refreshing to hear, you know, you, especially being a black woman who is this activist and this advocate, I mean, you have such a positive attitude, and I love it.

EC: And I love you because—and I’m going to tell you why. I’ve been in Charleston, and I’m getting little chill bumps. I worked at Food Lion, McDonald’s. Well, McDonald’s was my first place, and now that I’ve even moved forward, now I see lots of people going, “I know you. I see you on…” like, you know, and I say, “I didn't never see nobody want to fight me over a hotcake yet, so I must have been doing a really good

job.” Like, seriously, you know? I just spoke the truth, and if I said it a little harsh, that just means I am that much more passionate about it.

But my thing is —excuse me—not really talking until more now. I used to tell people, you know, if you wake up in the morning, and you're breathing, keep it moving, and that was a motto that I had when I was sixteen because I knew at home what it was like. I knew sometimes at school what it was like. Like, I knew what it was like sometimes, and people never knew what I was going through, and I always had a smile on my face even though the inside of me was probably torn to shreds, but I always had a smile on my face, and nobody ever knew that. So, I said, “If you wake up in the morning, and you're breathing, I don’t care how bad it is.”

OW: Especially right now. Like you said, like you started, 2020 has dealt us a hand that I don’t think any of us expected and especially, you know, with George Floyd, and I think, although this police brutality has been going on for much longer than 2020.

EC: Oh, yeah.

OW: I think George Floyd did strike a chord with a lot of people, especially bringing that mother aspect into it, and I can see that you love being a mom.

EC: Oh, yeah.

OW: And I like seeing how passionate you are to just molding not just your own children but the future, you know, these next generations, and I think when George Floyd is calling out for his mother, I think black, white, you know, everyone was like, oh, I’m a mom.

EC: I guess you haven’t followed my post. I got some pages up. I actually have a shirt made. You don’t make this mama angry. That was my motto. And when I went out

there because I did go out there and do some marches, and then people—you know, right now, it's like when I say, being attacked, I guess you would say, I guess, to the opposing people that don't believe that black lives matters, to the people that think that Black Lives Matter is a terrorist group, to the people that think that me saying, Black lives matter is me disregarding other black lives, those are the people that are opposing.

OW: Absolutely. Mm-hmm.

EC: That's not what I mean, and you know that's not what I mean.

OW: Absolutely.

EC: So, the fact that I've screamed, Blacks lives matter, is another reason I've been attacked, but it's like—where was I going with that? I'm sorry.

OW: It's okay.

EC: I forgot what I was talking about. Stop it for a second.

Pause

OW: Oh, it's okay. There we go.

EC: When we went out, and we protested, like, after one of the marches, and everybody is going back to that one night of outcry and frustration, and I keep telling people, if you can't understand what led up to it, then don't ever speak to me again about that one night, which is why, as a mom, I kind of stepped out and, like I said, to kind of embrace these children because I'm going, where is the leadership? You know, where are the elders? Where are the parents? Like, you know, because I didn't want our children to keep dying in the streets, but I wanted them to try to figure out a way to collectively try to make tangible changes. But I remember out there watching, and there was a sign that I saw that said that when he cried out for his mother, that he had summoned every mother,

and that was when I had the vision to put my march together, and that's when I did it, and when I did that, I had my friend, like I said, I had my son into every one of those marches and in the newspaper.

If you've seen me, you saw my son. You done made this mama angry. And, like, you done mama so angry I'm running for school board now, so right now it's starting, you know, and that's where it is. If you can't do it from the outside and sending emails, and calling the police, and calling Live 5 [News], then I said, "I'm going in."

OW: Mm-hmm. And the night that you're referencing, that's the night that's been on the news, right, the night that everything on King Street happened?

EC: Yeah.

OW: Okay, I just wanted to make sure.

EC: Yeah, I keep telling people, "You know what? Just let it rest. If you don't even want to talk about the day or the night and any unrest that led up to it or the unrest that could possibly lead up to it again, I don't even want to talk about it."

OW: Absolutely. You know, and a lot of people called in, you know, rioters and looters and—

EC: That was not a riot. That's what I told people. That wasn't a riot. I said, those were outcries.

OW: Absolutely, and I think newspapers—their language sometime is very much misleading.

EC: Well, it is, even the news. I'll just be honest and say, and that's why I fight so hard right now. That's why I say right now it's really—it's almost scary to know that real life—like you said, you can see the news, and they put it just that way. So, doing the step

that I've done as far as activism, that just kind of allows them to dehumanize you, and then that's what's happening. That's really what has been happening as far as me being attacked on Facebook, as far as my friends still peacefully protesting, and them getting arrested now, especially during election time and all of this. You know, it's like I'm looking at it, and I can't even believe.

Again, like I said, I'm running for school board. So, just imagine if it was something bigger, and that's, like, I'm looking at all of this. Just really the dots are connecting, and I'm just shaking my head going, "I can't." And that's why I'm going for school board because you can keep your political on your sheriff's race, and you can keep your political everyplace else but do not bring that into our children's schools. Do not.

OW: Mm-hmm. I agree. I don't think schools are a place for especially that real negative political energy.

EC: And that's what it is because, right now, at this point, like I said, I don't know if you're paying attention, but third party entities that are coming over, that is privatizations of public schools, and it's already been happening. But the more control outside sources get on our children's schools, the less resources our children are going to continue to have, and that's not right.

OW: And I like that you brought up resources because you were speaking about your experience in Columbia at the schools you went to and the —you know, how the resources were so much different than the white schools, and so that is still an issue in Charleston County Schools.

EC: Of course, it is. I mean, like I said, I've lived it. I was there with them. I had the same materials as my white counterparts. Like, I had it, but I'm looking at my friends,

and I'm going why your stuff over here? But, you know, to me, when you're in the second and third grade, and you got the boat, and you got the train, you're not paying attention to that.

When they got red sticker, and you got—you're not paying attention to it. You just know it's different, and sometimes you might look around, oh, well, your stuff easy, and they might look at yours and go, oh, your stuff hard, you know?

OW: Absolutely.

EC: But, again, you don't pay attention to that. I just knew, at some point in time, I'm like, where everybody at, you know?

OW: Right, yeah. Earlier, you made a point about when these kids are getting older into high school and the idea of, okay, if you don't go to college, then clearly you're not good enough, or clearly you're not smart enough, but, also, I don't think there are enough options for kids who don't have degrees.

EC: No.

OW: And then they end up kind of like what you said earlier in these cycles.

EC: Yeah.

OW: And I know that trade schools, you know, when I was in high school, they had this thing called a career -- the [00:46:44 unintelligible] career center where kids could go and learn how to work on cars and work on things, but I don't even know if those are still around.

EC: No. Even when I was in school, let me see, we had marketing. We had shop. We had auto mechanics. My auntie actually graduated from school, and she was actually —she was a RN at the hospital, so way back even before—you understand?

OW: Mm-hmm.

EC: There was a time, and if you paid attention, and I've heard it rumored that when black people started to learn, like, oh, take it back, take it back.

OW: Mm-hmm. Right.

EC: Take it back. Take it back. So, I have an aunt that was an RN, and these are the same people now, when you look at it, that probably went to a trade and got into these jobs that need to die out right now or either computers are taking over, and these are the same ones that we're walking around like, why are you still hired? That's how they got into these jobs, but they didn't have some of those for some of us. We did have, like, marketing.

I remember the lady walking through the club, you know, Otis Spunkmeyer cookies, auto shop mechanics, so we had them. There were things that actually had them for us because, again, 'because I was in a predominantly white school. But if you went maybe over to, I think, maybe it was, like, [00:48:01] was okay, too, but if you got down to someplace like Eau Claire [High School] up there in Columbia, yeah, you might have been a little iffy.

OW: Got you.

EC: So, it was still the same. It was pretty much still the same. It's my daughter. Can I answer this real quick?

Pause

OW: Oh, absolutely. So, what is your plan when you get on the school board? Do you have, like, an order of business that you're like, first and foremost, this is what I'm tackling?

EC: No. It's a learning process, you know? I don't want people to think, well, she's just running to run. No. I want to learn. I'm sure they had to learn something. I'm sure they're probably not just going to throw me all the financials, but, look, I've managed to raise three children, and pay bills, and not be evicted, and keep a car, so I must know a little bit of something about financial.

OW: Absolutely.

EC: You know, we've learned by doing it. But my most important thing, like, I, really, I want to know. Like, I want to look at the budget. I want the families and the teachers to look at the budget, like, because I don't know how that works, and if we can look at it, let us look at it. So, I want to ask all these questions. Like, how much money do we get? Like, let the parents look at it and, like, let us start making decisions on how it should be allocated.

And, of course, you know, we just work on those critical needs area, and it's like an ask and answer type thing. You know, how do you fix the problem? Excuse me. How do you overcome an obstacle? And that's why I say problems [00:49:29]. But when we look at them like obstacles, and you figure out a way to overcome, then we'll be okay. So, we go in, and we ask the questions.

You know, "Moms, dads, caregivers, what's the problem?" "Oh, we can't do this on time." So, if they can't get the kids to work on time or get to school on time, then we figure out why. Then we fix the problem. We go to the next obstacle, you know, and, you know, we fix it that way, but we can't fix it when other people are telling us what needs to be fixed.

OW: Absolutely. I think one of the best ways to fix something is from within. So,

I think what you're doing is --

EC: Bottom up.

OW: Exactly. And there's been a lot of talk about defunding the police, and, you know, again, people are like, okay, well, let's say the police are defunded. Now, what do we do with the money? And I think giving it to schools and communities, especially black and brown ones, has probably been one of the number one things I hear of just reallocating those funds, and I'm just wondering if you have an opinion about that.

EC: Reallocation, definitely reallocation, just like they would tell us if we, as a mom—and I've had to go, and I needed some resources, right? Then they make you sit down through this class, and they tell how you bring in and how much you put out, and they're telling you what you can do without, so you and your family can still eat, like no cable, cheaper phone bill, things of that nature. Well, why don't we tell y'all what you can do with your money? Student resources, officers in school, and the only thing I can keep telling the people is, when we spend more money on the front end, then we won't have to spend so much money on the back end.

OW: Absolutely.

EC: We're spending more money for inmates than we are for students, which means you're telling me you're encouraging them to go to school just so you can get more money.

OW: The prison industrial complex is—

EC: Just like COVID, they get more money if we send our children to school physically than you do virtually.

OW: And in Greenville County where my niece goes to school, they're actually

going back to school full time, which I don't know if they're doing that here in Charleston, as well.

EC: That's why the state is, like, oh, y'all ain't got no kids in school yet. We're going to hold your money. Oh, we got to hurry up and send them back to school. Oh, we got to hurry back—send them back to school.

OW: And that goes hand in hand with the safety thing you were just telling me about. You send them back to school, and then what? You just end up shutting down again, and then children are going without proper learning.

EC: And again, that's why I keep telling them COVID leveled the playing field. Now, the same thing, white kids can get it. I keep telling them welcome to our world, right now. So, everything y'all have experienced for five months, we've experienced. I'm forty years old. My son is twenty-two, my daughter is seventeen, and my son is seven.

So, when I say people are tired, and that's what happened. What happened with George Floyd, I tell people, you know, this time, you didn't just piss off one group of people. You pissed off an entire nation of people, and the fact that it's not just black and brown people that are speaking up now, it's more of a time to complete the shift change that is needed, so we're not back here again.

OW: Uh-uh, because it seems like we are back here again very frequently, especially when it comes to police brutality.

EC: Because a lot of people don't want to step up and actually speak out, and right now is not the time to be quiet. Right now, is the time to keep the, like they say, keep your foot on the gas. Right now, is the time to keep your foot on the gas.

OW: Because it seems like if any change is going to be made, it's right now.

EC: And that's what somebody said a long time, like, a friend of mine. Have followed him really good on Facebook, and he said it. Like, my people, it's like y'all got these premonitions or something. You know, like they said, any time there is, like, a movement or when there is progress in the movement, that's when the attacks start to come.

OW: Mm-hmm, just like the protestors who have been in the streets, and the media stopped covering it, and, I mean, where in Portland, I think that was just last month, you know, they were out there every night, every day.

EC: Yeah.

OW: And you're right. It wasn't just black and brown moms. There were white moms out there. There were moms of other ethnicities out there, and I think, to me, that's very telling. It's like you said. It's not just one group of people. It's all people, right now. Everyone is tired.

EC: Yeah. That's why we know, and that's why when they keep telling us here in Charleston, and they've been attacking us and talking about black lives and Black Lives Matter terror group, I keep looking back. I [00:54:14] see all these old white people back here, like, for real.

OW: Those are the ones that are attacking and trying to hold, you know, the people who are trying to make change, but the points you made about who the people are who are in these positions at jobs, those are the ones where no change is being made, or institutions are staying as they are. School, school boards, superintendents are staying.

EC: Trust me. There was a lady who was [00:54:38]. There's another angry schoolteacher. She said I attacked her. Oh, they didn't like my boating behavior because I

was on a boat that had a flag that said black lives matter. That was horrible boating behavior, and that is not consolidated school board member behavior. What kind of boating behavior? What is it?

OW: And not to mention, what does constitute school board member behavior? Did she enlighten you of exactly what that looks like? They want to regulate us, but they don't offer anything else.

EC: In return. That's why my man said, "I wish a Karen [00:55:13 would]." I am so tired, right now.

OW: Working here, I've encountered my fair share of Karens, and it's like they just refuse to see a different perspective. It's like their perspective is the only perspective they know. Just like history. That's why people are unlearning things that we should've known back in fifth grade.

EC: That's why when they keep telling me, "What makes you qualified," man, "What makes you qualified?" Because obviously we're all in the same loop, the same thing. How you start out with nine planets? Now, we got eight. We started out with seven continents. Now, we got six.

Okay, now we're celebrating somebody who just went and carried the biggest genocide massacre, and we celebrating this person, and all of a sudden, like, really, because he discovered some stuff? I'm like, you know, I'm just done. And the only thing I can say about history is, I didn't even then. It's like it's history. Why do I need to know? And that's why it makes me feel good.

I'm like, oh, archives. In a hundred years, in twenty years, what do we really want people to know, or hear, or think, or believe, or remember about us? And right now, I

think that's what I'm trying to do. I want to make sure that what they remember about me, I am a peaceful person. I love, and I want nothing but the best for everybody and every child because I was that child. You know, I'm not a terrorist. I'm not trying to overthrow anyone.

I'm bothered that so much hate really exists in our world. And even when I say with history, whatever it was, you teach it to us in a way that we're able to make our own judgments and, you know, take it from our own perspectives. I don't need anyone going and writing anything about me that's not true, and someone reading it in a hundred years and is like, "Oh, my gosh, you know, she —" you know, that's not what I want, and that's not what anybody, you know, probably wants or needs. So, you know, when we think about history and what it is and history and what it was, like, I almost feel like we have to start making our own realities now. Like, that's the only way that I can put it.

It's like we have to make our own realities because I don't believe it. Like, I haven't, and I've always questioned it because I'm like, well, who said this? Well, who did that, and how do you know if y'all wasn't' there?

OW: Mm-hmm. I think that's why I'm really glad to be talking to you, so we can hear it right out of your own mouth. We know how you feel, and that way we don't have to speculate, and we don't just take the white person's word for it because sitting here talking to you, I can tell you're not a terrorist. But I think, you know, you are a black woman, and I think that people do find black women the easiest targets, and which is interesting because of all the black women I know or even don't know, just heard stories about, black women are extremely resilient, and they're strong.

EC: Yes, we are. That's why I say working right now, paying attention to what's

going on, and I say they prey. I think they probably think some of us may not be as intelligent or as they think. And me, intelligence is just not all in books, you know?

OW: Oh, absolutely.

EC: And, you know, just being aware, and paying attention, and understanding. And I think some could possibly fall into whatever because maybe they need attention, or maybe they need money, or maybe they—you know, and I think they prey, but I'm not a rich person. I've never had it. I've never been, but it doesn't matter because it's the impact that I would have on someone else that would make me much more happier than having all the money in the world and just some of the things that I've watched and paid attention to that people with all the money in the world, they have problems, too. And then when you think of all the money in the world just, like, grass being, oh, so green on the other side, we have to think how or why.

It may not even be there, so that may not even be real grass. And I've always questioned. So, no, I won't be that weak one. My daddy raised me. So, of course, you know, yeah, my mama had me, but my daddy raised me, so don't let the small frame fool you, is what I tell people.

OW: And do you think that, you know, your father raising you primarily has any bearing on the work you're doing now?

EC: I think my father raising me had a lot of bearing on how I feel as far as being, like, a parent, you know, work ethic because he always worked, so that strong work ethic part. Emotional part wasn't there. He was a man, you know, but, again, I don't condemn any of that because I can understand. You know, back in the day, it's like men are supposed to be tough, and that's how they're supposed to be. But, no, men are human.

They’re supposed to have emotional connections, too.

So, parent wise, you know, he taught me to know and understand. I’m sure you got a mushy part in there somewhere because, you know, he didn't yell at me. He didn't scream at me. He’s my dad, you know, but he just wasn’t that big ol’ emotional, sappy person all the time. I think everybody indirectly or directly around you ultimately has some type of effect on what it is that you decide to do later.

OW: Absolutely. My father is the reason I’m a historian, so I completely agree with you. My dad has had a huge impact over my life, so I understand. That's why I like hearing you talk about your relationship with your dad because I’m the same way. He’s not the most emotional person, but he’s always done very right by me.

EC: Mm-hmm, and I told people, you know, parent—they did, and you know what he’d say? This is what he used to tell me. “Well, I did the best that I could do,” and that's why I love them to death. They did. Mom, dad, no matter what it is that we went through, that's the only parent you have. They did what the world was given to them. They did what they learned how to do.

So, me, I’m just trying to do more for my children. I tell them that the best that I can do is, you know, it won’t be done until I can’t do it anymore. So, I can’t tell them, like, you know, your parents always said, “Go shoot for the stars.” I can’t tell them to shoot for the stars if I haven’t planted my foot anyplace else myself.

OW: That's really good advice. Wow.

End of recording.

MLL 11/11/20