

Chas Moore

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Activism, Anti-racism, Austin Justice Coalition, Black Americans, Black identity, Christianity, Christians, Community, Death, Diversity and inclusivity, Family dynamics, Incarceration, Jesus Christ, Marginalized communities, Non-profits, Prison, Race, Racism, Student organizing, The University of Texas at Austin, Trauma, Trayvon Martin, TX - Austin, TX - Houston, Underserved communities, White supremacy

SPEAKERS

Chas Moore, Rabert Sheppard

R Rabert Sheppard 00:07

This is March 31 2022. This is Rabert Sheppard interviewing Chas Moore in Austin, Texas for the [Religions Texas] project. All right. Just give me one moment to pull up my questions [pause]. All right, so these questions you can answer if you'd like, if you don't, that's fine. So feel free to be at liberty to decline to respond how you want. We want your answers. So tell me about your story, your family, your upbringing, the significant experiences that have been made on you.

C Chas Moore 01:13

So I was born in Houston, Texas to my mom, of course. Yeah, I was born in Houston, Texas, to my mom Pam, Pamela Pettit/Moore. My dad wasn't around, because he was in prison. And crazy enough, he was a two-time loser. Somebody that had been to prison two times before, and had got out, and then had some relations with my mom, and then got in trouble went back in, and I haven't seen my dad - I didn't see my dad until I was seventeen, eighteen, again. But my mom also passed when I was at the age of seven, so I was raised by my grandparents, my grandma Ella Pettit and my grandpa Lee Pettit, which was, the older I get, the more I realized that they really, particularly my grandma, did the best she could. My grandpa then passed away, not too much longer after my mom. He died in 2003. So it was essentially just me and my grandma, because my grandpa was already handicapped.

C Chas Moore 02:43

So I think a lot of that helped shape and guide me for the real world, just a lot of death and trauma at a particularly early age. Being raised by grandparents that, these people were born in late 20s and early 30s. So their experiences with race and racism from Louisiana and East Texas were something that was impressed upon me. I didn't deal with racism as a young lad, until I got to Austin. But when I was young, I had knew about the KKK and all these other stuff and things and instances from learning history and learn about civil rights movement, but I was

very much aware of race, just didn't know I was dealing with it until you get older and realize, "Oh, actually, everything's about race." So I think a lot of that. I think I was a pretty good student in school. Played football and sports.

C Chas Moore 03:54

My senior year of high school is when I decided to go play around with some knuckleheads and we got into some trouble. Long story short, I was committed of a crime that these other folks did, and at the age of seventeen, the judge told me that he wants to teach me a lesson, which I thought was fair at the moment, because I didn't know no better. What I thought was, "Okay, I get it. You're trying to teach me don't be around wrong the people, in the wrong crowd." But that sentence was eight years probation and second degree robbery. And I had to spend two months in Fort Bend County Jail. And also prior to that, because the sentencing came before my senior semester of high school. I had to spend every weekend in Fort Bend County Jail. He let me go to my prom for an hour or two, then I had to come turn myself in by midnight, like Cinderella or some shit. And then he let me go to graduation, and the day after graduation, I had to sit in Fort Bend County Jail all the way up into college orientation.

C Chas Moore 04:59

So here I am. My senior high school experience was just crazy, literally walk across the stage to go walk into a jail cell for two months and then out of a jail cell, headed to Austin, Texas for college orientation. So I think most people that have been impacted by the criminal legal system can imagine just the mental toll that took on me. I was in jail during the birth of Facebook, you know what I mean? I got out and everybody's on Facebook. I didn't know what was going on. So add that on top of getting to UT, the University of Texas at Austin. I'm from Houston, Texas, not really particularly used to being around White people all day, every day. In Houston, you can cater a day to where you don't see White people. We go to Houston right now, we can literally not see White people for twenty-four hours. So now here I am in Austin, and still not really familiar with what is White America, because I'm not from that, so getting into just the nick of things after orientation.

C Chas Moore 06:15

It was somewhere in the first day or the first week on campus. Me and my friends were walking down San Jacinto Boulevard, or Street, whatever it's called, and these group of White boys in a pickup truck scream, "Go home niggers." And that was a culture shock for me because it's 2006 at the time, I'm just like, "Oh, wow, that's crazy." Only other people have called me anything close to "nigger" is my peers. We say it as part of Black culture, whether you agree with that or not, but I've never been called that from a White person. So that's my beginning experience at the University of Texas, which would further lead on to a bunch of racist shit. They would deface to MLK statue, they would do blackface and have racist-themed parties and stuff like that, which really got me thinking about how it was our turn, my turn, as a generation to continue to fight for racial justice and equity and equality.

C Chas Moore 07:21

So that's really when I started my organizing career, if that's what you want to call it, which also led me to struggle in school, 'cause I was just all about the movement, and I didn't really care about nothing else. And I was on probation. There's a bunch of negative self-talk, that was like, "Man, it don't matter if you do this or not. You're gonna be a convicted felon for the rest of your life." So I was in and out of school, then I realized I'm over school. Wanted to focus on building a better tomorrow for people. Fast forward to Trayvon Martin. That really was my personal wake up call. I think a lot of people, not all of us, or maybe we choose to ignore, but I think some of us, we hear these wake up calls, and something clicks. And for me, that was Trayvon Martin. I was like, "Man, something has to give." So I started really hardcore organizing at that point. And then fast forward to 2015, after realizing that the NAACP and Urban League at that time, were not really understanding the frustration of the youth or young adults, I created my own organization, so we can fight the way we wanted to fight and approach things the way we wanted to approach them, and here we are. And that's a real, real, real quick and dirty version of everything, but I think that's the gist of it.

R

Rabert Sheppard 08:59

Could you tell me about some organizers or historical figures that you look up to?

C

Chas Moore 09:13

Yeah. Of course, I look up to the Mount Rushmore of Blackness, which is MLK and Malcolm X and Rosa Parks, all those folks that we always hear about. But the older I get, I realize that I was probably more closely in tune, I think intellectually, with James Baldwin. I really appreciate his thought processes and his wording around race and race relations. Also I think Nikki Giovanni is just another person that doesn't really get enough respect as far as what she brought to the conversations around race on a very deep level. Stokely Carmichael, Kwame Ture, is another person that I closely ally with because I've seen footage of him where he was young and super radical, then he realized, like, "Okay, we don't have to do all that." Well, I don't want to say that. I don't want to say that, but it was just a maturation of his radicalness, I guess. Fred Hampton is somebody that I've also, the more I read about what he was doing, and how he was organizing. Because he was the real Rainbow Coalition. He was able to get all facts and all walks of life together, an organizing principle for liberation for people of color and poor people around the country.

C

Chas Moore 11:06

I think those are my main ones. And I think about a lot of people that was behind the scenes, which is, I think, my next step. How to become a A. Philip Randolph, or a Bayard Rustin or something like that? Because I do think that this movement, or these movements, does take everybody, but they have to be fueled and led by young folks. So in 2022, thirty-four is getting - that's old in 2022. So I'm getting ready to hopefully find a mentee that I can give them the tools they need to take over at some point, so I can get to the back, and probably try to start a life for myself. But I think those are the people that I'm influenced by the most. But it's so many Black historical figures that we can talk about that all day.

R

Robert Sheppard 12:08

Yeah, wow, that's quite a list you've given us. What challenges have you faced in your work?

C

Chas Moore 12:21

So of course, initially, just coming out of nowhere, everybody's like, "Well, who is this?" You know what I mean? Like, "Who is this kid?" So I think battling through that over the years, and even still now a little bit, because I'm only important to people that do this type of work, or have some type of interest in racial social justice, right? So still trying to just make equality and treatment of Black people a popular thing. It's just crazy how much that ebb and flows. I think funding is always an issue, because nobody wants to fund - let me take that back. White people don't want to fund what they see as detrimental to them, right? So here we are a Black group that's fighting for Black health and happiness, and in abundance, and I think a lot of our White brothers and sisters and institutions, as they probably should, because that is what we're trying to do, they see that as a loss for them. And I was just having a conversation yesterday about how philanthropy is not set up to dismantle all these systems, you know what I mean? Philanthropy is here to keep the status quo going. So when you have organizations like mine, it's like, "Let's get rid of the status quo." That causes a glitch in the matrix, you know what I mean? So funding is a challenge.

C

Chas Moore 13:57

I think going back to what I said, getting people to understand that there's a duality, or there should be a duality in life. 'Cause I'm the guy, I'm not gonna tell you to stop having fun, right? Enjoy life as much as you can with what we got, because it just seems like it's getting crazier and crazier every day. However, I also do think that as humans, we have a responsibility to make the world a better place, not only for the people that's coming after us, however long the earth is gonna be here, but also to make current living situations for our neighbors and people that inherit this earth as good as possible. And that would have already been difficult to do, just as humans on this watery rock, but when you add in layers of race and gender and sex and all these type of things, and you create these systems that put people against one another, then we have to battle through that. So I guess I can understand why people don't want to deal with that, because it's already complicated. But just really getting people to lean into the idea that you are not here as an individual, we are here as a collective. And that's difficult. It just is what it is. I think those are my biggest challenges man. Definitely money, people's care factor, making people care longer than what they do.

C

Chas Moore 15:36

And then too, well, I mean honestly, very plainly just racism and White supremacy. 'Cause we got Black folk running around thinking everything is easy-peasy. You know what I mean? We got Wanda Sykes, who I still respect and admire, to an extent, sitting on Ellen's show, talking about how disgusted she was about Will and all that type of stuff. And us worrying about what these White people think about a family moment. That was a family moment from anybody that's actually Black, right? But to see White people catering to this narrative of Will is the bad guy, and he should be all this and that. It's just like, no, Will is a human. He had a human

emotion, and he was protecting his wife. I get all of it, right? I get the whole spectrum of what he did, what he could have did, what he shouldn't have did. But that don't mean we throw him away.

C Chas Moore 16:29

But even an idea like that, just cancel culture, to me, very much rooted in White supremacy and racism, because that's what White people do. White people throw people away. We don't do that. That's not really our culture and heritage. If you know who we are, and you know about tribes and stuff. People mess up, we hold them accountable, but we keep them close to the family, to a tribe. You don't punish people by throwing them to the outer remnants of nothing, you know what I mean? So White supremacy and racism, being embedded into Black communities and communities of color is really difficult, because a lot of people think racism - not racism, but White supremacy is just beheld by White people. And it's so imprisoned in our Black and Brown communities that it's probably almost more detrimental within our own communities than it is with them. So those are just some of the few.

R Rabert Sheppard 17:35

You've mentioned this throughout, but just to get it on record, who is your community, and who do you serve?

C Chas Moore 17:44

Man, when I started the Coalition, I promised that I was gonna find every Black Negro in Austin, and we was gonna be the Blackest Black Panthers, we was gonna be wearing all black everything. But then one day I woke up and realized I lived in Austin. The demographics are different, but also, as I begin to read and educate myself around, "Well, who really should be doing this work?" One, it's everybody, right? I think everybody has to commit to being anti-racist and anti-White supremacist and just being better people. But also, when you talk about White supremacy specifically, you have to include White folks. White folks should be doing that heavy lifting of undoing racism, right? That's their legacy. We have not benefited from it, we have been on the tail end of White supremacy and oppression, and I don't think it's our job to undo it.

C Chas Moore 18:52

But my community, my personal community is, of course, the Black community, people of the African diaspora. Because I do think that through Blackness, we are all interconnected, in this particular life that we're living because of racism and White supremacy. But my community is also other people of color. It's indigenous folks, is poor people, and not poor morally or spiritually, economically. It's gay folks, it's queer folks, because, again, I know my heritage, and I know that a lot of this work towards where we are now wouldn't have got done without trans and queer Black men and women that was fighting for us. So my community is anybody that's been labeled "other" or "less than" and those are the people that I want to fight for and build

community with. Because I just really think human beings are capable of realizing that it's only so much and very little that that separates us. And we should just be here enjoying this earth, I just really believe that.

R

Rabert Sheppard 20:16

How does religion or spirituality guide your work? Or how does it guide your sense of ethics or social justice?

C

Chas Moore 20:30

What was the second part?

R

Rabert Sheppard 20:31

How does religion guide your sense of ethics or social justice?

C

Chas Moore 20:41

I am a believer of Christ. That's how I was born and raised, and I still am. I think a lot of people have grown up to denounce Jesus, if you will, because of certain criticisms, that that's the White man's religion and all that type of stuff. Which, whatever. But it's my belief that Christ existed - well, we know he existed. And even when you look at his life, a lot of people would assume that - I don't know why people think Christ was a very timid person. There's scriptures, not many, but a few of him getting angry and flipping over tables and stuff like that. So I think Jesus himself, by definition, is a radical person. He was all about getting to the root of the problem and fixing things and helping people and stuff like that. I think religion helps me, more than anything, is leading with with grace. I think a lot of times, there's been situations where I go sit down, and I talk to the police chief or the police union president, and a lot of people say, "Oh, you shouldn't be talking to them." And for real, for real, these people are human too, and they are experiencing they're right, and they think this is their fight, and I gotta respect that. And as long as they're not fighting dirty or immorally, who am I not to talk to my fellow man to see if we can get to some conclusion around these issues that we're all dealing with?

C

Chas Moore 22:40

So I think my religion, my faith, teaches me to be patient, to operate in love as much as you can, to be forgiving, to be as righteous as you can. Especially as a leader, because I think a lot of times as leaders, your head get big, and that ego start eating away at you. And it's just a daily reminder that it's not for me, it's not because of me, it's because of a lot of people that have been incidents in my life, and that helped me get to where I get to. So yeah, I don't know if it's a easier way to say that. But there are so many different aspects about my faith and my religion that just keep me grounded in, really, love, faith, and forgiveness.

R

Rabert Sheppard 23:35

Give me some short term or long term goals, whichever one you'd like. If you'd like both, that's fine. But we're interested hearing how do you envision the movement that you're behind and what you want to do? What do you see happening short term, or long term, or both?

C

Chas Moore 23:59

Short term, at this point, is more money, more money and more staff. There's a lot of things that we're working on, and we're cooking up, that I mean, they're gonna get done, but they would be able to get done more efficiently and more effectively if we had more staff. A lot of people think expansion, but we don't have a framework of mind to build this out city by city, because we understand that all cities are different. What works here in Austin may not work in Detroit or Lake Charles, Louisiana, right? So really just want to expand out locally as much as possible, to hopefully make Austin one of the - if not the first - truly anti-racist city by practice and policy. Long term, man, I don't know. I'm just a child of the wind, as my grandma I would say. I go where the spirit leads me, where life is calling. Things seem to be easier that way.

C

Chas Moore 25:08

My whole philosophy is just I really don't control any of this shit, right? It's a little bit of faith and hope and wishing and luck, a lot of the universe. I don't know, I just get how grateful I am for the universe guiding me this far. Just walking into my purpose. So I hope that I continue to walk in my purpose. I don't wanna be one of these old thirty, forty, fifty-year-old people that don't know what they're here for. So I think long term, after I'm done with the organization, I'm probably going to be fighting for Black folks for the rest of my life. I don't think that's something you just retire from. But as far as the spotlight and being at the head of the table and all that type of stuff, I know that's coming to - relatively sooner than later. But yeah, what the future holds? I don't know. We'll see, we'll see.

R

Rabert Sheppard 26:25

How do you hope to create a more inclusive Texas?

C

Chas Moore 26:34

Well, if it was up to me, I mean, one, I think it has to be a large shift in capital. I think we need to start investing in not only Black people. Yes, we need Black people to be CEOs and elected officials and stuff like that. But we also need to start investing in Black communities, right? We need to start building in infrastructures in Black and Brown communities, to having Black entertainment districts, having Latino entertainment districts to where these districts can help sustain the neighborhoods themselves, right? I think by having our school systems be more integrated, because I really do think if our kids were able to intermingle at younger ages, I think that could curb a lot of this stuff that we've been dealing with for so long. But also, when it

comes to education, I would have very real conversations about race in our country. In Germany, I believe, up until a certain point, they talk about the Holocaust every day. Like, "This is a part of who we are as a nation's fabric. Let's talk about this, so we don't repeat these things."

C Chas Moore 27:55

But in this country, we like to - "slaves are indentured servants." No, these people were [captured] and sold and in chattel slavery for 400 years. That's not an indentured servant, that is a slave that has built this economy. So I think start being more honest about the things we have. A huge shift in economic wealth and mobility. Yeah, and just more appreciation of the different cultures we have in this country, right? We call ourselves the melting pot, but everything is still very much - When you think about the big holidays, right? If we're such a big melting pot, we should have big celebrations here for Chinese New Year just like they do over there, or Juneteenth should be a nationwide holiday, right? Things of that nature, but we still only celebrate St. Patrick's Day and Presidents Day and all that type of stuff. It's just simple things like that can, I think, move us forward and make us a more inclusive society.

R Rabert Sheppard 29:13

Any reflections or wisdom to impart for the people listening to this interview down the line?

C Chas Moore 29:25

Down the line, hopefully—I don't know how far down the line is, but hopefully whenever somebody hears this, maybe something I did, or something they did, or something you did, we did, Black people are free. Black people are free to - I want Black people to be free from instances like what happened with Will and Christ, right? I respect Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, but him saying, "Will set Black people back," I want the same freedom that White people have, right? Because when White people do something, that's one individual, it's not a thing that all sets them back. That's not something that they subscribe to. I hope we get to a point where Black people can embrace our Blackness and embrace our Black culture, but not be held so close to one another that we don't have individuality. I hope we can get to a world where we realize a lot of these things we bought into systematically, police and prisons, are things that we don't actually need. And what we need is more compassion and care and patience and love for one another.

C Chas Moore 30:45

And I really hope that, I don't know, man, I just hope that we, as humans, can figure out how to enjoy this place together before it's too late. One thing I know for sure, we are all gon' die, right? No matter what way you cut it, slice it, dice it, that is inevitable ending to all of our stories, right? There's no director's cut where you get to change it. That is a certain ending for all of us. And I just think sometimes for me, it's so simple that, I look at it like, "Man, I'm going to die. That's a absolute truth. I want to enjoy life as much as I can." And I think if we can get to that one universal truth together, or at least I'm hoping we find out how to do that, so we can

just really enjoy life. We should all be at the beach or hiking or doing something together. I think that's what life is intended - well, I know it is, right? If you're a person that breathes and subscribes to Christianity, that's what they was doing in the garden, they was just chillin'. They didn't have a care in the world, they had one rule. And I think life is supposed to be more of that. And I'm certain - well, I know we have the tools. I'm not certain if we'll dig deep enough to find them and use them. But man, I sure hope we do, man. I really hope we do.

C Chas Moore 32:20

I want us to realize that we're fighting over, "You have a different language, and your skin is darker." Very, very, very crazy little things that mean nothing at all. But the only way we can get there is by dealing with these false truths that we created. A lot of White people believe that Black people are inferior to them, or that they're savages and beasts. And yes, I do think Black people are the originators of cool, and I think we are the innovators of swag, and we are all things that are hot, right? I do think there's this unprecedentedness around what is Blackness and how we carry it. But in that same right, that doesn't take away from anything that any other group of people has. We just dope at everything we do. But that don't mean you can't be dope either. You know what I mean?

C Chas Moore 33:23

I just want us to be able to be different together, recognize that our differences don't make us enemies, or we should be afraid of one another. They are actually what makes us unique and what makes this whole thing called life worth the pursuit. That's why you want to travel to New Orleans and get some authentic New Orleans gumbo. That's why you want to travel to Jamaica and get some actual jerk chicken, because those things is what motivates, or can motivate a lot of us to keep doing this thing called life. So I just really hope we figure it out as a human race, as a human species, figure out how to actually coexist and just enjoy life to the max before the sun goes out.

R Rabert Sheppard 34:11

Do you have any questions for me?

C Chas Moore 34:23

No, brother, I mean, unless you just want to tell me a little bit about yourself. But yeah.

R Rabert Sheppard 34:29

Yeah I will briefly, after the recording. Thank you, Chas. We appreciate you taking part in this project. I really appreciate it, brother. You added a lot to our records, for real. So I want to thank you for saying all that you did with me. And I also want to thank you on behalf of the people that's gonna come after and listen to your interview. Thanks Chas, we appreciate that.



Chas Moore 35:03

Thank you for having me.