Texas After Violence Project
Interview with Bob Libal

LOCATION: Austin, Texas

DATE: July 1, 2021

INTERVIEWER: Murphy Anne Carter

VIDEOGRAPHER: Jane Field

TRANSCRIPTIONIST: Matthew Wackerle

MURPHY ANNE CARTER: Awesome. So my name is Murphy Anne Carter and I'm here with Jane Field and today is July 1st, 2021, and we're here with Bob Libal. So excited to be here. Thank you for agreeing to do this.

BOB LIBAL: Yeah.

CARTER: First question will kind of just be—could you speak about your journey in activism and what that means to you? You can obviously decide what that means to you, and where you want to start, to however you arrived here.

LIBAL: Sure. [00:00:34] Yeah, I mean, I think that my journey to activism starts with when I moved to Austin.

[break in video]

LIBAL: So, I think my journey to activism started when I came to college at UT in 1999. There was a sort of wave of student activism while I was there. Both the Afghanistan and Iraq wars started, 9/11 happened, the Seattle protests against the WTO happened, which are these very formative movement moments, I would say. And there was this incredibly active social movement world at UT. And I kind of fell into it.

I have some, like political history with my family, my grandfather was a history professor in Indiana, who was a historian, a labor historian. He studied Eugene Debs, who was a 20th century socialist who ran for president from prison. So there was that sort of backdrop. I moved here from South Dakota. I didn't know anyone. Literally, no one in the city of Austin, when I moved here. It feels like a different time, right? Obviously we had like the internet and stuff, but it felt like being dropped into a completely new place, and it was really through organizing work that I found community, [00:03:36] which I think is important.

One of the most formative campaigns that I worked on was in the spring of 2001. There was this national movement to push Sodexho Marriott, which was a campus caterer, off of campuses, because it's parent company was the single largest investor in Corrections Corporation of America, the company that [00:04:06] later became CoreCivic, the largest for-profit prison corporation in the world at the time. That spring was very formative. A bunch of us went to Mexico City when the Zapatistas marched into the Zocalo. And then there was an occupation at UNAM, the University of Mexico City. We came back and we started this campaign to pressure the University of Texas to end its contract with Sodexho [00:04:36] Marriott. There was a camp out on the South Mall.

We ended up doing a sit-in in the tower, in the vice president's office, and then a few days later, Sodexo announced that it was dumping the shares in Corrections Corporation of America. It had been kicked off of, I think, a dozen campuses around the country. And I think it was sort of a moment where you realized that organizing can have power, right?

[00:05:06] We did these sort of actions, there was a whole lot of media attention to it, and suddenly, we were getting called in to have conversations with the president of the University who certainly didn't know who any of us were. And I think it was this idea that if you organize, even with a relatively small group of people, you can gain power. And it also opened my eyes to [00:05:36] the whole concept of the prison industrial complex. The idea that there are corporations who are making billions of dollars off of the incarceration of millions of mostly Black and brown people in the United States, it spoke to a particular kind of injustice. So, yeah, maybe that was what sort of the spark.

And here I am. I think there's certainly a thread that ties all the work that I've done over the last 20 years, from that moment. Certainly, I would say, the wars, the beginning of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, particularly, were very formative, also in that they showed that millions of people being on the right side of something doesn't necessarily prevent the bad thing from happening. And I think [00:06:36] until last summer, those were the largest sort of global social movements and global protests against something. So yeah, I think that was just a very formative time. And then right after college, I started working at Grassroots Leadership doing the student organizing, coordinating students who were organizing to try to divest their institutions from the private prison industry.

Then, I think it was in the summer of 2006, that Hutto opened as a family detention center, and it kind of was a part of this wave of speculative prison building across the state of Texas was mostly designed either to detain or incarcerate immigrants. We got calls from the University of Texas immigration clinic, somebody [00:07:36] that I'd gone to college with was working with Barbara Hines. Frances Valdez called and said, We're visiting women out here. There are little babies in prison jumpsuits, literally. And we can't get the media to even drive out and cover it basically. And so we held the first protest at Hutto in December, around Christmas time of 2006 and that was the beginning [00:08:06] of the organizing and activism around immigration detention in Texas.

So, you know I think the two threads of the organizing work I've done around criminal justice and around immigration organizing, both flow from those moments.

CARTER: Yeah, and the link of mass incarceration, detaining people.

LIBAL: Yeah. Back then, the other thing that happened in 2006 were the giant [00:08:36] immigration marches, which I think are in some ways largely forgotten. But it was a moment where it was very apparent that we didn't have the capacity to handle the moment, right? There were these huge marches, tens of thousands of people in cities across this country, but in Texas, I think it was the largest march ever in Dallas with 500,000 people. [00:09:06] Here in Austin, there were literally four people who were tangentially working on immigration issues. Four or five, right? It was Silky and I at Grassroots, and Cristina and Emily at Workers Defense, and Josefina Castillo at American Friends Service Committee. And we were trying to have enough water and drive the truck with the speakers from one location to another.

I think that was [00:09:36] one of the big moments around immigration enforcement in particular, that sort of previewed, I would say, what was to come, both in terms of the incredibly harsh enforcement—immigration detention, deportation, laws that criminalize immigration because it was in response to the Sensenbrenner bill, that would have made it a felony to be in the country without papers. So, [00:10:06] yeah, I think it previewed that, but it also previewed the power of the immigrant rights movement's potential over the next ten, twenty years.

[break in video]

Yeah. I mean there were huge protests everywhere, right? And I would say it was like a different moment. [00:11:13] I guess I"ll probably talk about this. But I think it was one of the first times that there was a sort of outpouring of just genuine community, at least in the work that I was doing. A genuine community uproar around immigration, and then you see the organizing that happens around the DREAM Act, in 2010, 2011, and [00:11:43] the failure of the DREAM Act, and I would say the social movement that comes out of DREAM Act organizing, right? The very dynamic social movement that has a sort of mainstream arm, and its legislative arm, and its radical arm.
It's the whole spectrum of a social movement, right? And I think you see a lot of that earlier in the Immigrant Rights Movement than you do [00:12:13] in the movement against mass incarceration, at least here in Texas. For much of the oughts and, you know, through 2014-2015, the Criminal Justice Reform world was not social movement based. It was policy-based, it was a couple of smart people at the legislature. Trying to just, trying to figure out, [00:12:43] you know, sort of tweaks to the mass incarceration system that would make it less awful. And it wasn't led by or had meaningful involvement by directly impacted people. And I think you only start to see that change in the last five to seven years.
You see it changing very dramatically, and for the better. But yeah, you see that a lot in the earlier immigrant rights movement of the last 20 years. [00:13:13]

CARTER: Can you kind of speak to that, you saying this is something in Texas, it not being initially more of a policy based kind of experience? I'm curious, like, what your thoughts are

behind the Texas part to that. I don't know quite how to articulate that, do you know what I mean?

LIBAL: Sure, yeah. I mean I actually think that it was a feature of [00:13:43] most national work across the country on criminal justice reform issues is like one, that it focuses state legislatures. So it was sort of, by definition, policy change work. And that two, it was very focused on the policy change part, rather than the idea that the way you win in the long term is you build power. To move the needle. I think it was in some ways more bipartisan. [00:14:14] So I think you see the negative impacts that in some ways today, of the growth of the social movement aspect.

Because you also see the growth of the backlash, right? I mean it's pretty remarkable that the Texas legislature's first session after the protests of last summer is that the big outcomes are to make it harder to get out of jail to, you know, ban the talking about race [00:14:44] in schools. to make large cities have to fund their police departments at ever-increasing levels, to the detriment of their other services.

And I think that has to do with the hyper-polarization that we've gone through. But it is really sad, right? That that's the reaction.[00:15:14] And I think that's one of those moments kind of like the Iraq War. Where you see power matters. Who has power really matters and you get that power, I think, through long-term organizing but there are moments when the backlash can be severe.

And I mean, that's the history of mass incarceration, right? It's a backlash to Black people in particular, trying to gain some semblance of power in this country.

CARTER: Something that I'm hearing too and I'm curious is, you described how even in college as a part of the student movement, it was like, this is how you found community. And even talking about the particular people, the social movement side of this, the community side of it. And so, I'm curious if you could speak to the community that you see in Austin and the visions for public safety that you see. Whether it be the strategies that come out of those conversations in community, or even the people and the sentiments and the ways that you've kind of seen the past year take shape in how the community is existing, surviving thriving, et cetera.

LIBAL: Yeah, I mean it's a little bit interesting because I've been somewhat removed in the last year because [00:16:44] I've stepped back from the director position at Grassroots Leadership. And I'm not completely removed, I've been involved in things, people call me in to help with different projects. But it's interesting, sort of stepping out from being very involved in a team, right? Because I think that one of the things that does really tie people together is feeling like they're a part of [00:17:15] something that is moving together. And yeah, I mean, I think that's

one of the most important aspects of doing organizing work, is developing a sense of camaraderie. A sense that you are part of a community, a sense that you are moving a project forward together, that you have agency, that you are an integral part of the team. Not just someone who [00:17:45] is expected to show up at something because it's their job or because, you know, they're a member of something.

I think there are natural hills and valleys of social movement work. That's okay and that's good, right? The life cycles of movements are [00:18:17] they go on and there are these theories about bridge organizations that provide institutional history and capacity for when there are the opportunities. I think that's in some ways, for all the critiques of nonprofits,I think that's in some ways the role that they play. It's that they provide the capacity for when there are moments of energy. [00:18:48] Sometimes they provide the ability to translate the community outrage into policy change. Sometimes they can stifle the policy change, but I think that when they're done well and I think Grassroots Leadership does that fairly well, they provide a space for people to plug into something that then is able to effect change. [00:19:19]

I guess that's increasingly the role that I see myself in. Is how can you be a sort of conduit for change to happen when there are those moments of social movement, the sort of peaks of the social movement trajectory.

CARTER: This is, I guess, another question I have, particularly to you talking about the life cycles.

LIBAL: Yeah.

CARTER: Or the peaks and valleys. Sustainability is part of my question [00:19:49] as well. Particularly because you've been in Austin for all this time and been able to notice and see how it evolves.

LIBAL: Yeah. That's a good question, because I feel like when I was younger it just felt like it was just go all the time, you know? It never felt like you needed to take breaks and now, it feels very [00:20:19] much like you need to have the thing that's motivating you and driving you. But also the ability to recognize that it's not always going to be a sort of like, the pedal to the floor kind of a moment. Sometimes it is, but embracing the fact that there are lulls in the ways that organizing works.

CARTER: So what's driving you?

LIBAL: Yeah, that's a good question. I get very motivated when I see people who've been affected by injustice standing up and speaking for themselves. And when I see people in

positions of authority ignoring or condescending [00:21:24] or co-opting and disregarding their views. So I think the women's jail fight over the last couple of months has been a prime example of both of those things. A sort of moment of organizing, mostly by formerly incarcerated women, to speak up and say, [00:21:54] Jail is not what we need. There's no such thing as a trauma-informed carceral facility. And then to watch the condescension from some members of the Commissioner's Court around that is something that is—I think elected officials at their best make space, I think organizers do their best to [00:22:24] make space for people, right? Bring people into processes, don't try to shut them out. Don't lecture to them. Don't try to win their battles based on people's pain. So those kind of fights motivate me. Yeah.

CARTER: Can you actually describe and kind of provide some context to the women's jail fight as well?

LIBAL: Sure, yeah. So, going back [00:22:54] to well, there was a master plan, quote unquote, for building new jail facilities in Travis County. Essentially, the idea that, Well, our jail facilities are getting kind of old. Let's figure out—the county went through a process where they hired a consultant to come in and develop a master plan for basically, How do we tear downs the jails and then build new jails. That was [00:23:24] opposed starting in 2017 or 2018, when it kind of became more publicly known. I don't think that anybody in the criminal justice reform world even knew about it before.

I think it was the spring of 2018, particularly at Grassroots Leadership and Texas Advocates For Justice, the formerly incarcerated organizing project of Grassroots Leadership. there were a whole bunch of formerly incarcerated women that showed up and testified and spoke to the press about why [00:23:54] a new jail was not what we needed. You fast forward, in 2018 to Travis County Commissioners Court voted to basically delay the implementation of it. But I would say it was very contentious. And that it was very clear that some of the members of the Commissioner's Court really wanted the jail to go through. They were very upset that sort of organizers had showed up and [00:24:24] thrown a monkey wrench in their plans to make this jail happen.

They voted I believe last year, maybe in 2019, to go ahead and design, to contract. I think it was three or four million dollars for part of the design project—it wasn't the design project, cause that's what they were voting on this time, but it was the next phase in the project. They released some of their certificates of obligation, [00:24:54] the funds to fund it.

So then last year has seen a lot of things change, right? We've undergone the largest sort of national social movement and reckoning with racism in the criminal justice system in 40 years, 50 years. We've also gone through the biggest pandemic in a hundred years, [00:25:24] right? We elected Jose Garza as district attorney, and Dalia Garza as county attorney. Some of the

criminal justice reform policies that we've implemented over the years, like the Freedom City's policy, which makes it so that police, by and large, don't arrest people for a whole category of low-level Class B misdemeanors, some of the marijuana policy stuff. That's happened here in Austin, these have gone into effect, which has meant that the jail population [00:25:54] is much lower today than the master plan called for. The master plan called for a jail capacity of 2800. Today, there's 1,400 people in the Travis County Jail and the numbers continue to fall, even after the pandemic.

The first phase of that master plan was to tear down and build a new women's jail, a sort of consolidated women's jail, that was designed for almost 400 women. Today, there's like 150 [00:26:24] women in the jail. 90% of them are only there for three days, right? It's like in and out. So they don't even make it to Del Valle, most of them stay in central booking.

So when this idea, like, Let's go ahead and move forward with a $80 million new jail for women, which is essentially for 40 women who are there at this moment who have been there for more than three days, I think there was a lot of pushback [00:26:54] on that from community organizations. The response of some folks on the Commissioner's Court was, Well, we have to do something to provide services to people. So we're going to call this a trauma-informed facility, right? A trauma-informed, gender-responsive facility, which is a jail, right?

I think that it really speaks to this idea, one, that some people deserve—some people get treatment outside of jail facilities, generally more [00:27:24] affluent, whiter people. And then the only place that poor folks, and people of color get treatment is in jail. That that's an acceptable paradigm. And two, this idea, that you can just dress a jail up, and dismiss the idea that it is a violent institution by nature, right? Which I think—I feel like, it makes me sound like a radical [00:27:54] to say that, but it's just true. Whether or not somebody needs to be incarcerated, leave that notion aside, but the act of arresting someone and incarcerating them is a violent act, right?

And the idea that we're going to invest that kind of money, that we're going to kind of use euphemisms for it at this juncture, rather than develop a plan for [00:28:24] the people. Develop a plan that would keep people out of jail, that would get them the sort of mental health and substance abuse treatment programs that they need outside of the jail. The sort of housing, the domestic violence support, all these kind of things. I think that struck a chord with people. So that's why you saw hundreds of people call in a few weeks ago [00:28:54] to the meeting and testify against the new women's jail.

At the beginning of the day, we definitely didn't know if we were going to win. We thought that we almost certainly were going to lose Commissioner Travillion and Commissioner Shea, because they gave sort of impassioned speeches in favor of the jail. And by the end of the day, it

was very clear that there was a unanimous vote against moving forward with the jail. Although, it was just a one-year delay and commissioner Shea in particular said, Let's [00:29:24] not throw away this master plan, let's adapt it.

I think what you see people like Annette Price at Grassroots Leadership and others saying is No, scrap this idea that we have a master plan for jail facilities and let's develop a master plan for the people who are involved here, that provides them with the services and provides them with the resources that they need to be successful. And to reduce the violence, [00:29:54] to reduce the harm that is caused both by crime and the harm that is caused by incarceration.

CARTER: There was a moment, just then when you were talking about—I know this sounds radical, but all of this aside, like putting somebody in a jail is violent. And a lot of what you just described—in terms of, instead of having a masterplan for a jail, why don't we have a master plan that will actually help the people who are most harmed. So I'm curious if you could describe or talk about abolition [00:30:25] and also kind of fitting in what the radical tags that maybe are attached to it, versus the reality that you kind of distinguished even just then. [00:30:36]

LIBAL: Yeah. I mean for me, it's honestly been an internal struggle as to whether it makes sense to say, I am an abolitionist. But for me, what that term means is not—at least how I would identify with it is not [00:30:55] end all law enforcement and incarceration today. But to me it is a vision of what a safe and just community looks like, that says that the goal should be to end violence period. With the recognition that violence and other forms of harm—with the recognition that [00:31:26] incarceration is a part of violence, right? That it is a violent act. I think we have so normalized mass incarceration in this country, that it is hard for us to even see that. But clearly, it is. If any other institution, if your workplace, or if you were holding me in this room for two days or ten years against my will, that would be kidnapping, or that would be considered a violent act.

[00:31:56] But for some reason, when it is the state that has done it, we've considered it to be normal, right? And in places like Austin, that considers itself to be this kind of progressive place, we kind of think like, Oh well, like we can't do that because that's a bad thing, right? I mean we had both Commissioner **Shea** and Commissioner Gomez saying, We don't mass incarcerate in Travis County, we run a humane criminal justice system. [00:32:26] We have never mass incarcerated, right. It's just this idea that, Well if it's a bad thing then we can't be a part of it. Part of the challenge of the more radical critique, the Abolitionist critique is actually, we have to look at these systems that we are a part of that some of us benefit from, and say, This is not what we [00:32:56] want as a community.

How does the Northstar towards undoing the harm that both happens in community, that have—there is a particular challenge in our community right now, there's the sort of ongoing challenges that have always existed in many communities, but there's a particular challenge around the gun violence that we're seeing, and the spike in homicides, right? I mean, we do have to address that. We have to [00:33:26] note that that is a horrible thing that is happening and figure out what those interventions are. We've tried over the years as a society, just locking up more people, committing that violent act of incarceration against larger swaths of people. But that hasn't really, that hasn't worked to [00:33:57] make communities whole, right? And I think a lot of communities will say, like, that it's created generational harm as well.

So yeah, I think for me, what that means is, how do we create interventions to cycles of harm that don't simply add to the sort of cycle of harm?

CARTER: And it seems—I know we've talked about and noted [00:34:27] the power of last summer, kind of the historic moments that have happened. But even just at a more local level, we had Prop B on the first or first or second of May at the beginning of May. And then we had this, this fight for the new women's jail, and I'm curious, you know, what else is coming? Or what else is in the future that you're anticipating for organizing and strategizing in Austin?

LIBAL: Well, I think that the ballot initiatives are going to continue. I was very involved in the organizing against Prop B. I don't necessarily fault everyone who voted for Prop B. I understand people feeling like, What is happening? [00:35:27] There are now thousands of homeless people that I can see every day, right? Even if there wasn't a direct correlation between—there wasn't an increase in the number of homeless people over the last couple of years, it's stayed fairly steady. But people were much more visible, and they were in some places closer to where people go. It was higher visibility.

I do think that the people who led [00:35:57] the Prop B effort, it was a cynical, politically driven, it was a cudgel against some of the poorest, most vulnerable people in our community. So a certain aspect could gain more political power. Particularly, the Travis County GOP and the police union who've been—over the Trump Administration and through the Black Lives Matter movement—have been increasingly isolated politically. They don't have any power anymore. [00:36:27] This was how they've decided that they're going to sort of get back in power.

It's a very sad thing that people's lives, like Alvin [Sanderson] and other folks who I've met through this work, that they're just voiceless pawns, right? To people who [00:36:57] don't want to create a solution to the underlying problem or problems, right? Like the underlying problem of skyrocketing unaffordability in this community that's leading people to homelessness to the lack

of substance abuse and mental health services, that leads some people to homelessness. They only want to gain political points off of it and it's just gross and it's heartbreaking and it's ugly.

But I think that it has set the stage for those groups, particularly the Travis County GOP and the Police Association, right, are now emboldened. And the next stage is the ballot initiatives in the fall. They're running a ballot initiative to essentially force the city to have a police ratio that would make the city higher—I believe it's five hundred [00:37:57] police officers, which would decimate the city's budget, right? It would essentially say, You got to cut fire, you got to cut EMS, you got to cut libraries, you got to cut parks, right? All the things that make all things outside of law enforcement that make communities feel like communities, right? That make communities feels safe in other ways.

I think it's a direct threat to the idea [00:38:27] that we can create communities that don't simply rely on law enforcement for all of our public safety needs. Because, I'm sure people have said it here before, but the communities that are safest are not communities with the most police, they're communities with the most resources. Monetary and otherwise.

So how do we ensure that every community in Austin has the resources that they need to be whole and safe? It's not by upping the percentage of [00:38:57] the city budget that the police take up from 40 to 45 percent, right? I think it could have other unintended consequences, like if the police are going to make, if we're going to have that many police, we're probably going to have to have less well-paid police, which is not good either, right? And it creates all kinds of other problems.

So yeah. I think that's part of the next battle. Then I [00:39:27] think there are questions about the soul of our community. Are we a community that invests in jails or are we a community that is investing in the longer term, sort of things that we need to be safe and whole. I mean everything from the immediate housing, substance abuse, health. But also to the long-term. How are we creating a resilient community in the face of [00:39:58] what is very apparently going to be a much hotter, more extreme place to live in. In our lifetimes and certainly in our children's lifetime. Having a future-oriented approach to all these questions is really important.

FIELD: Can I jump in real quick? It's sort of a left field question. [00:40:28] Not exactly, but you're talking so much about the future and also, all of these intersecting issues, and I wonder if we could look to the past for a little—

LIBAL: Sure.

FIELD: You're welcome to say, like, That's not my expertise, but I was also thinking about, as you were talking about the master plan that people were basing the new jail on. That [00:40:58] immediately turned my mind to the 1928 master plan and how that has had ongoing impacts even today. It seems like there are a lot of intersections. So I was just wondering if you had anything that you could talk about.

LIBAL: Yeah, I mean it's interesting that we seem to be very good at developing master plans, for systems of exclusion and oppression, [00:41:28] rather than systems of inclusion and justice. Like, I don't think the county at least—and this is where I spent a lot of my time thinking over the last few months—I don't think the county has master plans, for instance, to end homelessness.

I know that there's a summit that the mayor has convened. Trying to get the county to invest in it. I don't think we have master plans to end addiction or to provide mental health services to everybody who needs it. Efforts to update our housing code and infrastructure seem to be—they seem to go nowhere, and there is an extremely powerful set [00:42:28] of interests that maintains the status quo that was essentially built on the idea of exclusive neighborhoods, right? I think that it's a real challenge. It is a little bit of a scarcity mindset. It's this idea [00:42:58] that, Well we have this thing—and by we, I mean typically people with power and resources and land in this city—We have this thing and if, you know. It's a lot like the conversation on immigration, it's like, Well do you want a homeless person sleeping in your yard? Well, do you want a drug treatment facility in your neighborhood? Do you want immigrants coming to your community, ruining your community? I think that [00:43:28] logic is deeply racist, and it's just inaccurate. People from lots of different backgrounds contribute to the strength of our community.

Especially, when you look at a city like Austin today, we are not a city with scarcity. We are a city with abundance, we are a city with just unbelievable inequality. We have to address that inequality. This is off topic but, you know, I've been thinking a little bit about [how] we gave Tesla a bunch of money last year, not a ton of money, but like $16 million or something like that. The county did, to build the new truck factory and in southeast Travis County, near Del Valle. And it just seems like we gave the richest man in the world, literally the richest man in the world, money to move this factory here, [00:44:28] and there was some sort of idea that, Well these are pretty good jobs. They pay, I think the medians like $37, $38 thousand or something like that. That's not the worst job in Travis County by far but we did a salary analysis five years ago at Grassroots Leadership and if you were a single person with one dependent, so if you were a single mom or dad with a kid, the living wage was $45,000. And that was five [00:44:59] years ago.

So it is this idea that we have to work harder at ensuring that everyone in our community is not just able to survive, but is able to make a decent living and is given the amount of resources in

our community.today, that should be doable. It takes tough conversations with, about, [00:45:30] inequality. And tough decisions about changing the way that we prioritize things in our community. Because I think we have prioritized—we made those things very normal, right? The idea that you can't have an apartment complex in a rich neighborhood, right? The idea that you're going to have a master [00:46:00] plan for a jail, but not for something that serves people, right? I don't know, so a little bit of a soapbox but, yeah.

CARTER: Well, I enjoyed the soapbox. And I really appreciate how you approach all of these things, recognizing how they interlock and then are able to articulate the kind of building blocks that go into it. [00:46:30] I'm curious just how you have been dealing, particularly, saying that you worked so hard to rally against Prop B and Say No to Prop B. How was your experience, just as a human in Austin, and as an Austinite, who's been here for so long, seeing this happen? It's not just a one-off, it's a build up, that all contribute and speak to each other. If you could just talk about your personal experience.

LIBAL: Yeah. [00:47:00] I mean, it was really deflating. Again, I understand in some ways, I think that there was an opportunity that the Save Austin Now folks took and utilized. It was like a moment—so I understand why it happened and I actually think that the vote was closer [00:47:30] than some people anticipated it being. A similar ordinance passed with, like, 80% percent of the vote in Denver, which has sort of similar political leanings. I think this is part of, we've had this social movement happen and this is part of the backlash. This is part of how you see tough-on-crime start to happen in the 70s and 80s, right? As a [00:48:00] result of the push for black inclusion in society.

But yeah, I mean on a personal level I just kept thinking of like—I got to know Alvin really well right during the campaign and working with him on a few of the things that he did. And it just felt, again, this sort of very ugly side of our community. [00:48:35] That very ugly side of our community not saying, like, this is the wrong policy, we should be doing this thing. But saying, I don't want to see poor people who are disproportionately Black—I don't want to see them. And if we have these problems, I don't care. I don't care what happens to these people. Tell them to get the hell out of my view, or they go to jail. [00:49:05]

I think you see it, it's very interesting because I think again, it tiesmand exclusion because, the Save Austin Now had said, the solution right on their webpage, was city-sponsored campgrounds and transitional housing centers. But the same folks [00:49:35] have opposed transitional housing centers whenever they're near their neighborhoods, and when the list of potential sites that campgrounds could be came out, they were like, Oh, hell no, not here. Because some of them were in West Austin. So again, it's not about like, this was the wrong policy, the correct policy should have been to do this. It was really just about, [00:50:05] How do we score political points on demonizing the poorest people in our community by definition.

Then how do we, as a policy matter, not provide any sort of solutions? It's kind of like the idea of governing by not governing. It kind of reminds me of Grover Norquist, I want to take government and shrink it to the size of a bathtub and then drown it or whatever. It's this idea that you don't provide the solution but you cause enough havoc that people are vilified enough and then there's no solution but you can continue to vilify [00:51:05] them in order to gain political power. So yeah, it was very disheartening. That was a very inarticulate answer to it being disheartening. [laughs]

But I mean, I also think that if you look at who voted for it, sort of by geography. It also told a story of the city as we know it. It was two [00:51:35] cities, really, there's sort of west of Mopac and there's other parts of the city. There were areas around here that I don't know if they voted for Prop B, but voted more than you would think, right? And I understand why people—the solution isn't people having mass encampments under bridges. Or your people's neighborhoods. That's also not the solution. But we have to create the solution, [00:52:07] not just say, like, You can't live anywhere. Go hide or go to jail, right? That was sort of the plan. It is interesting also, because it feels like there is a whole bunch of stuff that is coming online, there's a sort of ramping up of Community First and some of the other transitional housing. That's obviously, like, we need all of those things and we needed [00:52:37] them to years ago. We needed them five years ago.

But it does feel a little bit like the people are going to be able to say, like, Well, it was because we recriminalized homelessness. That's what solved the problem. When in reality, these things take a lot of time and the fact that we're starting to get some of them online is a good thing. Yeah.

CARTER: So much of this, and I really appreciate your perspective of movements. Even at the very beginning, you're saying movement moments. Which is something I've kind of been following, almost as a thread throughout so much of what you shared of your experience. [00:53:14] And so I'm curious, 'cause we were talking about this, like, how the movement is operating right now? Is it operating on Facebook groups, where people who have loved ones at the Telford Unit can talk and organize together? Or a bunch of strangers **from across the state of Texas get in contact** with one another and rally together, in the midst of a pandemic? I'm curious, how would you describe the movement moment, to kind of borrow your language?

LIBAL: Yeah, [00:53:44] that's a good question. Yeah, I mean, I do think that over the last year we've seen the biggest social movement, both in terms of the size of the protests, number of people getting involved in various ways. Whether that's going to a protest or getting involved in the stuff, the work to get people out of prison during Covid. And yeah, I think that a lot [00:54:14] of it is happening on social media. And it's interesting, like so much of that actually

happens on Facebook. Despite kind of like politicians and journalists are on Twitter all the time, right? But it's mostly happening on Facebook, for good and bad.

The idea that people can get together and have sort of ongoing conversations and plan that way, I think is really good. [00:54:44] I also think, obviously there are downsides to social media, the impact on our society. I'm not sure that it's a positive thing, a net positive thing, and I think you do see the sort of, I wouldn't even say it's like a political polarization, but that kind of thing where there's no softening of personality or the way that people talk to each other.[00:55:14] Fights seemed to escalate very quickly.

CARTER: They're not making that space necessarily that you described earlier, that organizers have tried to make.

LIBAL: Right. Yeah, absolutely. It's easy to—I don't know whose quote it is but it's something that we said at Grassroots Leadership for a long time. It takes a lifetime to build and a moment to tear down. You can do intentional work forever, building relationships and [00:55:44] trying to act with integrity, but you can blow all that up in an instant. And now, it's very easy to do that. It's a Tweet, it's a Facebook post.

Yeah, so I think that, I think it's an emergent strategy, right? The sort of idea that building at the speed of trust. Building relationships with others. The challenge there is how do you do that and be able to make room for when a whole lot of people enter the movement. They might not have the same levels of political education or skills or speak the right language. [00:56:44] And also be able to scale quickly enough in order to have the power that you need to do things that we need to do. Like get rid of political leaders who are hell-bent on doing damage to our communities.

Those are the big organizing questions that kind of animate the moment.

CARTER: Absolutely. Do you have any other questions?

FIELD: Yeah, I have one other question and it's sort of a, you can answer or you can say, Oh, I don't really know. Whatever. [laughs] [00:57:25] I'm just curious, coursing through the conversation, has been this talk about privilege and how it is a privilege and power and how it is hoarded in ways, and how in the interest of hoarding that power, people [00:57:55] create these systems of oppression and violence.

I am just wondering if you have, and I don't know how—you can frame it however you want, in terms of how you want to answer. But I am thinking about, on the surface, on paper, you have lots of visible privilege, being a white man with a college degree. [00:58:25] And I'm wondering

about how you use that privilege. How you talk to other people who, maybe on paper have similar privileges but believe very different things than you do, and how you use that for conversations in your organizing and bringing people into movement, and whether you use it to call people out or call people in. I'm just curious.

LIBAL: Sure. [00:58:55] I think I'm very much of the mind that in general, you don't kick down. I'm never going to, or very rarely, I don't call people out, really, that don't have a lot of power, and aren't using that power in ways that are damaging. And the way I think about my role in the movement, is there are things that, being who [00:59:25] I am, there are doors that I can open. There are conversations that I can have. I can meet people in different places than, you know, an African-American, formerly incarcerated person. Like, sometimes—I shouldn't say that. Sometimes I can because of people's biases and because I have grown up speaking [00:59:55] a language that people understand.

And if you think as an organizer, If your goal is to grow the power of a group of people who have [01:00:25] not had the power to affect the policies that most impact them, you use that strategically. So sometimes that means using sort of my—actually, usually what that means for me in an organizing context is using the skills, the language, the resources that I have access to create a space so that those folks are in the front. [01:00:55] Whether that's at a press conference, where I can very quickly write a press release for a group of formerly incarcerated people doing an action around TDCJ.

I know a bunch of reporters, both because I've been doing this work for a long time and because reporters tend to be a lot like me. They [01:01:26] tend to be my age or younger white folks with college degrees. I can contact those people that I know. Sometimes I can get funding for folks, because I have those relationships. So it's about using those things. And then it is sometimes strategically calling out people in power. Whether that's a city council person or a county commissioner, to say there are other people like you who speak to people in your neighborhoods, who don't agree with this, and in Austin often that means indicting this idea of progressivism. It's like this idea I was talking about earlier. The idea that we're all progressives here, we're all liberals, we're all Democrats, and so therefore we all believe the same thing and we never do wrong.

You go back and watch Anne Richards, progressive icon in many [01:02:26] ways, go back and watch the criminal justice stuff from the early '90s, and it is as bad as a Trump video. I mean, it's awful. So, you have to be able to grapple with those histories. And I think that in some ways, I'm able to push people where some of my formerly incarcerated friends and friends of color are not able to do that in the same way, because of the way our society functions. [01:02:56] So I think, as an organizer, you really think about yourself and the way that you work, as how can you affect change most effectively? And I think that that can take different forms.

But I think there are sort of values behind it, like to be humble and to be a part of the sort of broader [01:03:26] work, to feel like you're in service to the broader work and to the people that you work with. But I don't think it's to say, like, Never utilize your privilege. **To say, like—I still don't know how to put this, but that there is no**—To not understand what your [01:03:56] education or race or gender or other forms of resources. To not understand that those come with values, to not understand that they come with value that can be used by the group that you're working with. So use those connections.

CARTER: Is there anything else that you would like to add, or anything that we haven't asked that has been on your mind?

LIBAL: I don't think so. I feel like, if you can edit some of the less coherent parts that would be great [laughs]

FIELD: I think it was perfectly coherent.

CARTER: I was gonna say, I really think that something you did really well and I appreciate, is like, navigate the nuance, and really challenging any of the flattened preconceptions. Even with something like progressivism, where I think a lot of people shy away from recognizing that it's a spectrum. I appreciate [01:04:56] that, and I consider it to be very cohesive. If that helps at all.

[Interview Ends]