



*In collaboration with*

**JON SOKOLOW,**

**Retired Senior Assistant General Counsel to the United Mine Workers of America Health  
and Retirement Funds**

**Activist with various entities and causes**

**Date:** February 24, 2023

**Interviewer:** Tashia Ethridge

**00:00 Tashia Ethridge** (Rambling while attempting to set up Zoom recording) All right, I am ready when you are. Are you ready, to begin?

**00:14 Jon Sokolow** Sure.

**00:15 T.E.** Question one, which is more of a statement—just tell me a bit about yourself and your background.

**00:20 J.S.** Oh gosh. So, my name is Jon Sokolow. I'm 63 years old. I'm an attorney. I grew up in New York City, went to college out of state, and then returned to New York to go to law school, and I lived there for, about 10 years or so after—with law school and afterwards. Moved around a bit, lived in Wisconsin for a while, lived in Vermont, and ended up in Virginia in the early 1990s. I've been a practicing attorney for more than 35 years, been politically active my entire life, and in a whole bunch of different spaces, going back to high school—I grew up during the era of the Civil Rights Movement, and the war in Vietnam and the anti-war movement. So that was sort of my baptism, in terms of activism, and got the bug of activism and never let go of it.

My professional life sort of mirrored that a bit. I made choices to be a public interest attorney, which I did for my entire life—I worked as a public defender in Brooklyn, New York for about six years,

doing criminal defense work. This was in the 1980s and this was the height of the crack epidemic, and the beginning of sort of mass incarceration. So, I was exposed to all those crises and worked within that system, worked within the prison system. I was involved in the labor movement, both as an attorney, `cause our attorneys were unionized, and then afterwards as an attorney for the labor movement—I was a general counsel to the public employees' union<sup>1</sup> in Vermont for some years, and then ended up in Virginia, and spent most of my career with the United Mine Workers of America Health and Retirement Funds. So, I was working as an attorney to defend pension rights and health benefits for retired unionized coal miners, in Appalachia and throughout the United States. And I did that... for more than 20 years, retired in 2015, and have been active in a bunch of different endeavors since then. So that's the short story.

**02:56 T.E. Good, thank you. Sorry, if you see me looking to the side, I'm just taking some digital notes. Word, thank you. I'm from Appalachia. So, I think that's a... very necessary and powerful thing for you to be doing in Virginia. You live in Virginia right now?**

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**03:15 J.S.** Yes, I live in Fairfax County, which is in Northern Virginia—outside of Washington, D.C.

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**03:20 T.E.** **Yeah, gotcha. Is it called the DMV? Is that part of the DMV?**

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**03:26 J.S.** It is. And it took me a few years to figure that out when I moved down here, `cause I always thought of DMV as the Department of Motor Vehicles.

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**03:33 T.E.** **Yeah, me too!**

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**03:35 J.S.** Which, if you're from New York, is sort of a curse word because, back in the day, you hadda wait in line for hours and hours to get anything done. So, I don't use the term DMV too much. But I do know what it is.

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<sup>1</sup> Formally the Vermont State Employees' Association

03:49	T.E.	<b>For sure. So, you grew up in New York—what part of the city did you grow up in?</b>
03:54	J.S.	I grew up in Manhattan.
03:56	T.E.	<b>OK.</b>
03:56	J.S.	I lived there from when I was born until I was in high school, in the same apartment, a rent stabilized apartment on the East Side of Manhattan. And it was my mother and father, and I've got two siblings, one brother and one sister—I'm the youngest of the three. And then (I) went away to college in Michigan, and then, as I said, came back to New York to go to law school and to start my legal career.
04:27	T.E.	<b>Yeah, I'm also the baby of three.</b>
04:33	J.S.	Ah! They say the youngest are the smartest, but don't tell anybody.
04:37	T.E.	<b>Right? Well, we just have... two examples of how things can go awry (with youngest siblings watching what their older siblings do). And so, you kinda—or it can go well, you can just look and watch. Three times the charm, right? Maybe that counts towards kids too.</b>
04:58	J.S.	They clear the path for you, in many ways, I think.
05:01	T.E.	<b>Exactly, yeah, I couldn't imagine being the first. How would you describe yourself as a kid, in terms of general personality?</b>
05:11	J.S.	Oh boy. I guess I was quiet, introspective. I was involved in sports somewhat, I read a lot. Back in those days it was, sports was not an organized activity. It was going out on the street and playing stickball, with your friends. First and third base were parked cars, and second base was a manhole cover, and you dodged cars and

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tried to be safe. So, you learn a lot of life lessons, doing that. But I was a pretty quiet kid other than that, I guess.

I got into high school and started doing a lot of reading. It was a pretty tumultuous time. This is the mid, late 60s, early 70s, so a lot was going on in our country and I was very much influenced by that. My brother and sister were both politically active. My parents were active in the Civil Rights Movement. They went to the March on Washington in 1963. And my dad was a volunteer attorney in Mississippi during Freedom Summer in 1964. So, my upbringing was very much, and my personality, I think, was very much tied to what was going on, not only in my family, but in the world around me at the time.

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**06:27**     **T.E.**     **Yeah, for sure. Do you mind if I ask, were your parents attorneys?**

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**06:34**     **J.S.**     My father was an attorney. He was sort of (a) corporate attorney, but did a lot of Civil Rights work on the side. He did it in his later years, worked on some death penalty cases, he did a lot of pro bono work. My mom was an educator. She volunteered in the schools in New York, teaching braille to sight-impaired children, and teaching remedial reading as well. So she was socially conscious and lived her values, in many ways.

**07:15**     **T.E.**     **Yeah. Were they from—and I know I’m going a little bit off of the questions, but (I’m) interested in your backstory. Were your parents from the South, North, East—I mean, the West—Midwest?**

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**07:29**     **J.S.**     From New York. So, my parents were both born and raised in New York. Our family... history in New York goes back, really to the 1840s. My mother's side of the family were German Jews who emigrated to the United States in the 1840s and 1850s. My father's side of the family were Russian and Ukrainian Jews who came over in the later wave, in the 1880s and 1890s. But the whole family settled in New York, both sides of the family. And so that was where they were from.

**08:10 T.E. You got some deep roots...**

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**08:11 J.S. Yes.**

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**08:12 T.E. ...deep roots in the city. We know your interests, where they crossed with your parents and siblings—all of y'all were very invested in justice; What were some signs that you had an aptitude or an inclination for advocacy? You were born with and raised around it, but...**

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**08:39 J.S.** ...I guess I would have to think about that. I mean, I was observing a lot, and participating, not really advocacy—I was going to marches, I remember some candlelight vigils we went to against the war in Vietnam; I remember when the war in Vietnam ended in May of 1975, there was a huge rally to celebrate in Central Park in Manhattan. And me and a bunch of friends skipped school that day to go to the rally. So I was, I don't know if you would call it advocacy, but I was involved, really from a young age, since probably middle school and early high school.

I got very much interested in criminal defense work, while I was in college. I participated in—I got very active in an organization that grew out of the movement to free Angela Davis in the mid-1970s. And that was really where I got involved in advocacy, to include a lot of writing, public speaking, on issues of civil rights violations, and political prisoners in the United States, and the racism that was going on in the criminal justice system, and sort of on the front end of the mass incarceration crisis. So, I would say as I was transitioning from high school into college, that's when I really started being a vocal advocate and doing a lot of public speaking and a lot of writing and organizing.

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**10:32 T.E. Did you know that you were going to be a lawyer?**

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**10:36 J.S.** Yes. Well, I was torn, actually. I was very interested in American History, in high school and wrote a lot—my senior thesis in high school, the school I went to, you had to write a senior thesis, and I wrote one on the history of political repression in the United States. So, I was very interested in those sort of issues as I went to college. I

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basically majored in African American History—I took any course I could take. And (back) then, the curriculum wasn't as rich, I would say, as it is now, `cause this was at a time in the late 1970s when colleges were just starting to create African American Studies programs. But I just gobbled up that history, so as I was finishing high school—I was finishing college, rather, I was sort of at a fork in the road; I could either go into academia, and be a historian and a professor, or I could get in the trenches, as I saw it, and become a criminal defense attorney. And that more fit my style—I wanted to be in the fight and not in an ivory tower somewhere.

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**11:58 T.E. Right. Yeah. Can you say your alma mater back to me—your undergrad alma mater back to me?**

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**12:04 J.S.** University of Michigan.

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**12:05 T.E. OK, University of Michigan. Got ya! My major is African American... and Documentary Studies.<sup>2</sup> I don't know what I'm going to do with it outside of conducting oral histories, but I'll figure it out.**

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**12:22 J.S.** I felt from a very young age that you can't—I mean, they call it African American history, but it's really American history. You cannot understand this country and how we got to where we are without understanding African American history. It's really the axle around which everything else rotates. That's how I see it, that's how I've understood it always.

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**12:45 T.E. Yeah, for sure. I agree... Sorry, I'm looking over some of these questions. What was the climate—not the political climate, you told me a lot about that—but the physical climate of New York City, growing up (in) Manhattan?**

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**12:47 J.S.** Well, it's a four-season city. Winters, you had snow, it got cold, summers were sweltering, fall was beautiful. Fall's always been my favorite season, I would have to say, just `cause of the colors of the leaves and the sorta crispness in the air. And New York's kind of a

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<sup>2</sup> African and African American Studies, and Documentary Studies (two majors)

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special place, around Thanksgiving time and into the holidays. So, the weather was northeast weather, so it was variable during the year.

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**13:46 T.E. Right. Did you experience any climate or weather incidents, as a child in New York City?**

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**13:54 J.S.** I would have to say no. I don't recall any in particular.

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**14:03 T.E. You're a climate activist and advocate—what was your relation to nature as a child, though? Was it always a deep connection there?**

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**14:13 J.S.** Yeah, no very much so. My brother was an avid backpacker, and I got—he exposed me to the beauty of backpacking. And so from, really high school, I guess, I was in the national parks, I traveled—I think in 10th grade, I went to the Canadian Rockies, took a trip out there for the summer, and saw that part of the world. I went to California around the same time, for many trips, and went to Yosemite National Park and climbed Mount Whitney and... saw the Redwood forests in Northern California. So, I got very interested in nature, and sort of the beauty of the national park system, really starting in high school, and that's been a lifelong interest of mine. I live not too far from a small national park in Northern Virginia. I go there probably every couple of weeks. So, it stuck with me—once you get interested, and once you understand the beauty of nature, I think you wanna get as much of it as you can.

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**15:32 T.E. Right? How many national parks are in the national [park system]—is it 400 something?**

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**15:39 J.S.** Oh, I don't know. I mean, there's national parks, there's national forests, there's—so it's in the hundreds for sure.<sup>3</sup>

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**15:47 T.E. I have a friend who, them and their partner...they have a growing list—do you have a favorite national park, in the U.S.?**

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<sup>3</sup> The National Park Foundation notes there's 425 park sites in the system.

16:00	J.S.	Favorite national park... Oh, do I have to pick one?
16:03	T.E.	<b>No, tell me all of them.</b>
16:05	J.S.	I would... probably pick Yosemite, just `cause the grandeur of the, of Yosemite Valley and the High Country up near Tuolumne Meadows. I liked Yellowstone. Yellowstone is a bit different. It's more rugged, it's more of the hot springs and this sort of... that piece of it, which is fantastic. But I'd say Yosemite is definitely, definitely my favorite. But I've been to so many. I've been to a lot of the parks and monuments in the Southwest, the Native American ruins from the Anasazi folks, Anasazi people who lived there I guess since the first millennia. So, I've been to a lot of the parks out West, as well as in the East. But if I had to pick one, if you allowed me to go to one more park in my lifetime, I would go to Yosemite, I guess I would say.
17:04	T.E.	<b>Word. I wish I could build on that but I haven't gone out West yet.</b>
17:06	J.S.	Oh, you need to do it. I totally forgot about the Grand—I've hiked the Grand Canyon twice. That's (a) beautiful area, but the high desert is a different climate than the forested lands in Yosemite.
17:28	T.E.	<b>Yeah, I'm excited to visit the Grand Canyon, too. I'm thinking this summer, it might be the summer to do it. But we'll see—COVID has kind of attacked my early 20s, so (I've) been trying to navigate all the things you should be doing in your early 20s, kind of got put on pause.</b>
17:53	J.S.	I can understand that for sure.
17:57	T.E.	<b>All right, let's talk about—when did you first learn about the Environmental Justice Movement itself? So, I guess EJ particularly.</b>
18:07	J.S.	I would have to say later on. I mean, as I mentioned before, I was active in a lot of different spaces. Environmental justice was not my



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focus, although I... was aware of it, certainly. And one of the early fights that I got involved with was the fight to free the Wilmington 10. This is going back to the 1970s, but Reverend Ben Chavis (Jr.) and nine others were arrested and charged on trumped up charges. So, I was aware of Ben Chavis, and I think he is credited with actually coining the phrase 'environmental racism', so I was certainly aware of that movement, but I didn't get involved, really, in a deep way, really until 2017, in Virginia, when I got involved in the fight to stop the Atlantic Coast Pipeline and the Mountain Valley Pipeline. And that was really when I sort of, went all in on the Environmental Justice Movement, and that's been my main focus ever since.

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**19:31**     **T.E.**     **[Tashia pauses to take notes]. Heard. And how does that work look today?**

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**19:37**     **J.S.**     Well, it's been a roller coaster. The fight that I got involved in, in the deepest way, was the fight to save a community called Union Hill,<sup>4</sup> which is a historic African American community founded by freed slaves, freed men and women, after the Civil War. And Dominion Energy (and) Duke Energy wanted to build a pipeline called the Atlantic Coast Pipeline, and a—which would have gone from West Virginia to Virginia, and would... have included a compressor station in Union Hill. So, they picked a poor, historic African American community to put this compressor station in. And I got very involved in that struggle in 2017. It's a struggle that we won. We defeated not only the compressor station, which was canceled, but we then defeated the entire Atlantic Coast Pipeline, which was canceled in July of 2020. So that fight was won.

There's other struggles that I'm involved in, particularly with the Mountain Valley Pipeline, which is ongoing, and that as I said, it's been kind of a roller coaster. We've delayed it almost 10 years now, and I think it's eventually going to be canceled, but it's a fight that is ongoing. What's most interesting to me is the movements around these two pipelines in particular have gone national—the Atlantic Coast pipeline fight went national; We actually brought former Vice

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<sup>4</sup> In North Carolina

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President Al Gore and Reverend William Barber (II) here to Virginia in 2019, for a big rally on Union Hill and the Atlantic Coast Pipeline, and then more recently, the Mountain Valley Pipeline struggle. There's been moves in Congress to legislate around some favorable court decisions we got, and the reaction was swift and strong from the Environmental Justice Movement, nationally. I mean, hundreds and hundreds of organizations got involved in this particular fight and are still involved. So, the movement is strong. And it's really built a community of folks who are dedicated, who love one another, who love the land and the water, and are willing to fight to protect them. So, the struggle is, how it's looking today, we're looking strong, but it's a difficult time—as you know, climate change is real, we're seeing the effects of it in our lifetimes, and (it) really calls for a diverse, united, powerful, grassroots movement to respond to it. So the work has to continue.

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**22:52 T.E. I have an additional question... I'm gonna ask you at the end...but, going on about your work, starting in 2017, were there any—what did you run into, any problems, or, what were your biggest challenges, when you first started your work?**

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**23:31 J.S.** Well, the first challenge was getting the word out. I mean, the way I got involved in the Union Hill fight, my family had been—in 2017, I don't know if you recall, but the big fight at Standing Rock in North Dakota was going on, and a lot of folks were sending, including my family, were sending supplies and support, to North Dakota to help the people there who were trying to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline, which is a fight that's continuing today, actually. And so, we got involved in that. And then I heard about the Atlantic Coast Pipeline and the Mountain Valley Pipeline in Virginia, in 2017, because those pipelines became an issue in that year's election for governor. The two Democratic candidates had different positions on those particular pipelines. And it struck me that, here my family was sending supplies to North Dakota, to fight a pipeline there—which is a great thing to do—and here I was, somebody who had been politically active and conscious my entire life, and I had never heard of these fights in Virginia, even though they'd been going on for about three years at that point. The first problem that I saw was just a lack of information. The press wasn't covering it, particularly in

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northern Virginia, which is reputed to be the more progressive or liberal part of the state. Nobody was talkin' about it, nobody was following it. So, I kind of—I had retired a year or two before that, from the (United) Mine Workers (of America), so I had some time on my hands. I made it my mission to get public attention on these fights in Virginia. I started writing—I've written probably 80 or 90 articles, since then, focused on the pipeline fights and environmental racism and environmental justice.

So, I would say the first problem was just lack of information, so, I tried to tackle that and use my skills and resources to get the word out. So that was, I guess, the first obstacle. The main obstacle, really. Because once people found out about it—particularly once people found out the story of Union Hill and how they were gonna destroy this community which had been there for, well over 100 years, they were supportive. So, the first obstacle was just getting the word out.

I would say the additional obstacles were just the power of Dominion Energy in Virginia. Virginia, in some ways, is a plantation run by Dominion. They own the political system, they own the politicians in both parties, largely. They control the legislative agenda, they control the public conversation around energy. So, it was a fight that required a lot of dedication, a lot of working at the grassroots, so I got very much involved in that. So, I would say those are the two biggest obstacles we had: lack of information, public information, and the power of the corporate lobby that is so influential in Virginia politics.

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**27:05**     **T.E.**     **[Some silence, while note-taking] ... What did... information look like in Union Hill? I'm curious—was it a... situation in which Black folk were organizing around saving their community, but still not a lotta people are aware of it, because of—**

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**27:28**     **J.S.**     Yeah, the politics in Union Hill were very complicated. Dominion Energy threw a lot of misinformation and a lot of money at the community. I think it's safe to say they split the community, including the African American community, where they had some

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supporters of the pipeline... Their approach, as it often is with corporate America, is to say, "This is inevitable, it's gonna happen, so you might as well take some money, `cause your choices are, we build this pipeline and you get nothing, or we build this pipeline and you get a piece." So, they organized a lot—Dominion did—and really created a lot of tension. Families were split. I know folks who were cousins, who were on opposite sides of this fight. The Black church in Union Hill was solidly anti-pipeline and anti-compressor station. And as you know, as so often is the case, the Black church became the center of the fight to stop this project. And ultimately, we prevailed, I think, because of the leadership of the Black community—the Black church, Black churches I should say, in Union Hill. We made this a moral issue. We brought Reverend Barber in in 2019 for a big rally, and he really crystallized the issue as an issue of morality. And I think that, as much as anything else, largely paved the way for what ended up being (a) victorious struggle—victory the following year, to stop this compressor station.

But it was challenging, and it was difficult. As a White activist, I had to be very conscious about my role, and not overstep my role, and understand that I was acting in a support role for the Black community there, and be sensitive to that. I think, I had, since I was a little older and had some experience in these spaces, that gave me some additional skills to try to navigate those waters.

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**30:00**     **T.E.**     **Do you have a favorite memory from this work?**

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**30:04**     **J.S.**     Oh, gosh, favorite memory from this work... I mean, other than the day we won, which was a great day, I would say this rally that we had with Vice President Gore and Reverend Barber—which I think was in February of 2019, just almost exactly four years ago—(is) my favorite memory. Because, the speech—Al Gore was great—(but) the speech that Reverend Barber gave at that rally was, I would say powerful and just gut-wrenching, for me. `Cause he invoked the ancestors in a way that, I guess I've heard before, but when you hear Reverend Barber talk about it, it just brought home really what was at stake here. `Cause this wasn't about a compressor station, this wasn't even about Union Hill; This was about the systematic attempt to erase African American history in this country, and not talk about

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it. This is a fight that has been going on for a long time, and is very current, now, obviously—you look at what's going on in Florida, in particular, where they don't wanna teach African American history, which is to say they don't wanna teach History. They don't want people to know their history. They don't want White folks or Black folks, or anybody else to really understand the original sin of this country, and how it's perpetuated today with systematic racism, in all sorts of spaces.

So, I would say that rally was, for me, really validated my involvement in this, because it brought together—I really should mention that I didn't just get involved in the Union Hill fight because it was an issue of civil rights. For me, it crystallized all of these struggles, and the intersectionality of all of these struggles—the fight for economic justice, the fight for racial equality, the fight for environmental justice, the fight to breathe clean air and to drink clean water; It brought all of those fights together, in a way that I had not seen before, at least, personally involved. And so, I think that was, to me, the lesson of this whole fight—that these issues are related, our enemies are the same, in all of these spaces; The companies that are perpetuating environmental racism are the same companies that are trying to bust unions. They're the same companies that donate to politicians that support mass incarceration, they're the same companies that give money to organizations that want to hold back progress in a number of fronts. It's all the same struggle, it's the same fight. Which is why we need a multiracial, multicultural, popular movement, grassroots movement, united—bringing people from all these struggles, together, 'cause it's the only way that we're going to move forward, is together, on all these fronts.

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**33:43     T.E.     I have a question, and, of course, with any of these questions, if you're not interested in answering it, just say so.**

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**33:48     J.S.     OK.**

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**33:50**     **T.E.**     **But I'm curious, when you first noticed that inter-connection and the largeness of it, how did that make you feel?**

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**34:06**     **J.S.**     Well, I guess I would have different feelings. It made me scared in some ways, because the forces arrayed against us are so powerful. I grew up in a time—I was born in 1959, so, I have very clear memories of Dr. King being shot. I have memories of Bobby Kennedy being shot, two months later, Malcolm, of course, a few years before that, and then the war in Vietnam going on. So, I would have to say—and then just knowing my family's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, and my dad being in Mississippi during Freedom Summer; He went down there two weeks after three civil rights workers—(Mickey) Schwerner, (Andrew) Goodman, and (James) Chaney—disappeared, and were murdered by the (Ku Klux) Klan, so it would be foolish to not admit that there's a fear factor involved in that, because the people you're working against are very powerful.

But the movement is what gives me hope. So, I would say my other feeling is really hope for the future. And as I see this younger generation coming up behind us now, where you all are involved in climate activism, you understand the intersectionality of these fights, in a much deeper way, I think, than my generation did. I mean, I could see, with the war in Vietnam and segregation and all that, the connections there, but your generation understands it on such a deeper level, and including communities across the board—the struggles for people... for civil rights, for gay rights, for environmental justice—this younger generation really gets that in a very deep way, so, it makes me optimistic. And I've had (the) opportunity to work with a lot of young folks who are committed to this, and I can just hear (it) in the language folks use. I'm guessing you're in your 20s, and I see a lot of folks—women in particular—speak at these events and I think you guys really get it, really get it in a way that my generation didn't necessarily get in such a deep way. So, while we did a lot of good work, I am very buoyed and hopeful 'cause I see so many young folks getting involved—and not just in the United States, but across the world. You know, Greta Thunberg, and that whole movement.

So, I would say there's a fear, certainly, of the forces that we're up against, but I think, in the end we win these fights. And I think what Dr. King said is very much true, that the arc of the moral universe bends slowly, but it bends towards justice. And I may not see the ultimate victory on these fronts, and your generation may not see it, but if we just push... forward as much as we can, and then we pass the baton to the next generation behind us, that's the way progress has always been made in this country. It doesn't happen overnight. People seem to think it happens overnight, when something good happens, but I guarantee you in any of these fights that are victorious, there were generations of folks who were fighting that fight long before the victory came, to make sure that that day would in fact come. I hope that answers your question.

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**38:15 T.E.** **No, it absolutely does, thank you so much. Who's on your team? Who are some folks that you've worked with, some organizations you've done your work with? And maybe the organizations that you're currently involved with, or community groups?**

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**38:33 J.S.** Well, let's see. I mean, there's a lot of organizations involved in the Environmental Justice Movement—in Virginia, there are really too many to name. But we certainly have, you have the POWHR Coalition, Protect Our Water, Heritage, Rights, you have Appalachian Voices, the Sierra Club, the NAACP in Virginia has been very vocal on the pipeline issues in particular. So, there's a lot of organizations that I would say are on my team.

We had a rally... in September in Washington, D.C., where we had literally hundreds of organizations co-sponsoring, to bring people to Washington to fight, not just the Mountain Valley Pipeline, which was the issue of the day—what brought us there, but to bring these struggles together. So, we had people from Tennessee, who stopped the Byhalia Pipeline in Memphis, we had people from ‘Cancer Alley’ in Louisiana and Texas, we had people from Minnesota. I would count all those folks as on my team. It's a powerful movement. As I said, hundreds—hundreds of social justice, civil rights, environmental justice organizations.

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**40:10 T.E. What are your... I know we spoke a little bit on this hope of passing—sorry, someone's mowing the lawn right outside of my house. I know we spoke about moral arc bending towards justice, this idea of passing the baton from generation to generation; Could you speak a little more on your biggest personal aspirations for the Environmental Justice Movement, and maybe how you plan to realize them?**

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**40:48 J.S.** Well, I would say there's short-term and long-term goals. The short-term goals, we need to stop the Mountain Valley Pipeline in Virginia and the other fossil fuel projects that are being contemplated. The way we do that is we build a multiracial, multicultural, grassroots movement, to do that. And then that movement will enable the long-term goals—which is to eradicate environmental racism in this country. This has been going on for far too long, as you know, with polluting facilities being targeted to communities that are perceived as unable to fight back—largely African American communities... The best predictor of whether a polluting project will be sited in a particular area is and has always been the percentage of African Americans who live there; That's just a fact. The highway system that was built to split communities in the 1970s, same problem. So, the long-term goal is to live in a world where that doesn't happen, where that's considered a moral evil, and is simply not done. But we're not gonna get there for the asking, we're gonna get there by fighting for it. So, my long-term goal would be to really build the movement, and create a national conversation that really gets at the wrong here. This country makes it a practice of intentionally forgetting our history. And the dominant narrative, particularly after we had two terms to President Obama, is that we live in a post-racial society where all the problems of slavery and the ensuing problems were all solved—just went away magically. And that—you can only believe that if you stick your head in the sand. And people need to understand—and I think the Black community understands, it's the White community that largely does not—that this is all of a piece. The decision to bring slaves to the United States in 1619 is directly correlated to the problem of mass incarceration today, just as one example. The decision to have slavery in this country for hundreds of years is directly related to the effort to bust unions, particularly in



the south, where the anti-union movement was motivated largely by racism and (a) desire to not let Black workers organize.

So, I'd say to your question about what my long-term goals are, that it would be for people to really understand this, and then to do something about it. Because it's—White folks don't benefit by racism; They're told they benefit by the lie that 'if you step on the person below you, you get up the ladder another rung.' But what's always been true in this country, as I understand it, is that the White working class in particular is lied to, and has been lied to systematically, and it's happening today—it's happening with DeSantis in Florida, it's happening, happened certainly with Trump, where White folks are told, "You may be poor, you may have nothing, but at least you're not Black."

And that mentality just needs to change, because the White folks, even those who have racist beliefs, are in fact harmed by racism every day. They may not understand that, but they will, eventually, eventually, because people aren't stupid; They may be lied to, they may be misinformed, but they're not stupid. When they start to understand that the boss who has his foot on your neck is the same boss who had their foot on George Floyd's neck—their knee on George Floyd's neck—when you understand, in your gut, that these are the same folks, and we have a common enemy, then that's where understanding starts, that's where organizing starts, that's where social change starts. So, that's really my aspiration, in the long-term, is to get to that place where people really understand this, and so that... my grandchildren's grandchildren can really live in a world that's at peace with itself.

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<b>45:51</b>	<b>T.E.</b>	<b>So, I'm hearing you name that next steps look like these larger conversations in organizing, and around knowledge and justice, or do you think I—am I saying that appropriately?</b>
<b>46:09</b>	<b>J.S.</b>	Yes, 100 percent.
<b>46:10</b>	<b>T.E.</b>	<b>Are there any other next steps that you see that you may have left out from the last question?</b>
<b>46:18</b>	<b>J.S.</b>	No, I just think that a lot of this—and as I said earlier (regarding) the way I got involved in the pipeline fight in Virginia—a lot of this just has to do with lack of information. We don't...the disinformation

universe, led by Fox News and the right-wing echo chamber, has seemingly endless resources, and we don't have, on the left, something like that, to get at the truth. So, we need to do it more on a grassroots community-wide level, until that happens, until we get the equivalent of a Fox News on a national level, which I think is gonna be a long time coming. We need to organize and just get information out there so people are aware of what's going on, because that's really—without getting the truth out, we can't get anything done, really.

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**47:19 T.E. What are the—I hear you identifying that as a large challenge, of lack of information or truth-telling, or truths, and histories, and access to histories. Would you say that's the biggest challenge facing environmental justice advocates currently? Or what would you say is the biggest challenge, facing EJ right now?**

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**47:42 J.S.** I would say, yeah, that is the biggest challenge. I mean, certainly the power of the forces against us is an important challenge. But one effect of their power, one result of their power, is they just get their lies out quicker than we can get the truth out. So yeah, information really is key. We had this whole fight in Congress the last few months, where they were trying to pass what was being euphemistically called 'permitting reform,' which is to say they wanted to pave the way for more fossil fuel projects by gutting bedrock environmental laws, like the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which has been there for many years—50 years in the case of NEPA—to protect marginalized communities that are facing these projects. And the way that they tried to get this law passed, is they said, "Well, you need permitting reform to get wind and solar, so you should sign up for this." And that was a pretty powerful lie—they got a lot of votes for that, including from some folks in Congress who should know better. And we had to struggle mightily to get the word out that if you actually read the law, not listen to the baloney that's being spewed, but read what they're actually proposing, it's heavily skewed towards fossil fuel projects. And the little bit that's in there for the wind and solar is a little bit of a sweetener to basically keep people's eyes off the prize.

So yeah, getting information out there, getting the truth out there is important. The good news is we got the truth out there and we beat that particular permitting reform fight—bill—four times. And we understand it's coming back for a fifth time, possibly, in this next Congress, or this current Congress. So, the fight continues, but you really have to work hard to get the truth out; That's the first step in any of these struggles.

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**49:48**     **T.E.**     **On the flip side of that, what's some of the largest progress that you've seen with the EJ Movement throughout your life, and who was part of that? What felt important? What steps were taken?**

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**50:04**     **J.S.**     I'd say the biggest change is we now have a national conversation about environmental justice. Even five years ago, you had the media dismissing the whole concept of environmental racism, questioning what that was, even though that's a term that I mentioned earlier that Reverend Chavis introduced, probably in the late 1970s, early 1980s. But I think there's now a national conversation around environmental justice and environmental racism that really, that I had not seen even five years ago, much less 25 years ago.

So, I think that's the biggest progress, which is why I'm hopeful, really. Because it took a long time, it took a lot longer than it should have. But as I mentioned, people aren't stupid. You only have to read—you don't even have to read, just drive through any major city in the United States and see where the landfills are, right? See where the highways bisect communities—there's no highways bisecting the community in Beverly Hills, you know? But in Richmond, Virginia, and cities across the country—Philadelphia, Black communities in particular, were almost destroyed by just them building a highway to divide the community up. So, people aren't stupid, people can see with their own eyes what's going on, and I think when you get the information out there to supplement that, you're halfway there towards winning those battles. So, I'm hopeful.

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**51:55**     **T.E.**     **I know you've named a few throughout this conversation, but who are some key players in the movement today that you identify?**

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**52:04**     **J.S.**     Oh, gosh. Well, Reverend Barber would be at the top of my list, I would say. He speaks to me in particular, with his understanding of American history, and his whole framing of our fight as a fight for a third Reconstruction. He puts the pieces together of American history, where we had Reconstruction in the post-Civil War era, we had the Civil Rights Movement, which dismantled legalized segregation as sort of the second Reconstruction, and now we need a third reconstruction which brings all these fights for environmental justice, and the fight against the false narrative of White religious nationalism, the fight for economic justice, the fight for labor rights.

So I guess he would be at the top of my list, but (also) Vice President Gore, Dr. Mustafa Santiago Ali<sup>5</sup> has been a big leader—both when he was in the federal government and now as an activist. We've got Justin Pearson, in Memphis, Tennessee, who led the fight to defeat the Byhalia Pipeline, which eventually was defeated, and now he's an elected member of the Tennessee State Legislature. We've got John Beard, I think in Louisiana, who is leading struggles there. I mean, it's just too many people to name. (The) Native American community in particular has been in the leadership, and the forefront of these fights, for many years, and I think, are coming into their own right now as really recognized national leaders for the fight for environmental justice.

So, I should have hesitated to start naming people `cause I could name 10 or 20 people, and that would leave out the hundreds and hundreds of people who are unnamed and unknown, and get the work done on a day-to-day basis, those are the folks—the big names draw people, draw crowds—but the folks who are doing the work, (and in) particular, women, I mean, I just have to say, as in so many areas of our national life, women carry the weight, carry disproportionate weight, and the most effective organizers I've seen are the women involved in this struggle. That's not bias, that's not

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<sup>5</sup> Executive Vice President for the National Wildlife Federation

opinion, that's just a fact. Just get on to any of these Zoom calls and see who's running the show—literally running the show; Doing the tech, doing the speaking, doing the organizing. So, it's really the unnamed people, the unknown people, as it usually is in American history. You know, for every Frederick Douglass, there were thousands of abolitionists whose names we will never know, who brought that fight to a successful end.

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**55:29 T.E. Yeah, say that. Thank you for naming that because as soon as I asked that question, I was like, "Hmm, I don't know how I feel about this question," you know? I had read it a few times looking over this interview guide, but it wasn't until it came out of my mouth that I thought exactly what you were naming, right, like it's strange to say—what does it mean to name key players, when you think about all of the people in the background who are actually moving things forward, right all the people who were in Lowndes County, or were in these communities who had to live in the communities, as your father was coming down from New York to help with Freedom Summer. You know what I'm saying?**

**So, thank you for naming that and I'm going to bring that up to my peers in my next class, about like maybe we could chop or even shift the language of that question. So yeah, I really appreciate that.**

**What advice would you give to someone who is looking to get involved in the activism space, but doesn't know quite where to start? Activism is a broad question—I guess, speaking directly to environmental justice.**

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**56:48 J.S. I would say two things. Number one, everybody has something to contribute. And number two, never give up hope. That's how I would summarize it. You don't have to be a lawyer or a writer, or a doctor, or an engineer, or have gone to college, or have a deep scientific understanding of climate change; You just have to live on this planet, and see what's going on, and understand that something needs to be done about it, and nobody's gonna wait—you can't wait**

for somebody else to do it, you've gotta take matters into your own hands.

So, everybody can contribute. If you can't write, well, maybe you can sing. If you can't sing well, maybe you can stuff envelopes. If you don't wanna stuff envelopes, maybe you can organize a rally. If you don't wanna organize a rally, maybe you go to church, and you can educate your fellow parishioners. If you don't go to church, maybe you're in a union. I mean, everybody's got something to contribute. And I would say that would be my major advice.

And my second piece of advice, we never give up, never give up hope—we have no choice; You can't give up hope. The people who give up hope, often are the people who have the luxury of giving up hope, because they don't perceive themselves as being affected by environmental racism or anti-union, union-busting. They don't see themselves affected by the whole threat of climate refugees. But if you live in the United States, and you're not worried about climate change, maybe you should worry about what's gonna happen when millions of people live in a place that's now unlivable and they have to move. What about the problem of mass starvation, crop failures? What about the problem of civil wars, because of lack of resources? You can't live on this planet and think that you're not affected by these problems. And if you get involved, and just contribute something—you don't have to be a full-time activist, most people have jobs or other things going on in their life, they can't do it—but don't give up hope; You can contribute something.

And by the way, you'll meet a lot of nice people along the way. That has been gratifying to me, to meet, particularly young people who I work with. They're just good people who really love this planet, love their friends and family, and get involved in these fights—not from a place of hatred or fear, but from a place of love, to make this world a more livable and just world for all of us.

So, I think if you keep that frame of mind, and stay positive about it, then you can get involved. And I guess I've learned from my ripe old age of 63, I've seen enough change over the years—just to give one example, in the early 1990s, I was general counsel for the Public

Employees Union in Vermont, and we fashioned a proposal that I wrote, and we pushed through, to give health benefits to the gay and lesbian domestic partners of state workers. And it was the first state in the United States to do this. We won that fight, so if you were not married, and you were in a relationship, a gay or lesbian state worker, you can get benefits for your family. And it was a big fight. We had members of our own union picketing our office, because of the homophobia—they were against it. But what was interesting is, we wouldn't have had to have that fight if we had gay marriage, we had marriage equality. But that phrase was not on the lips of anybody, including me, at the time. It was just a given that the marriage laws were such that you can only get married if you were in a heterosexual relationship. So, we didn't fight at that time for marriage equality—it wasn't even a concept, I don't even think the phrase existed. Certainly not... it wasn't popularized. But this was the early 1990s, and now we're in 2023, and we have marriage equality, and it's just not an issue.

So, as I said, the arc of the moral universe is long, but it does bend towards justice. And if you understand that change can happen, but you may not see the change come to fruition, but you know it's gonna be there because that's the way history has always worked—if you keep that positive attitude, then you can get involved in these fights and play your part, and be in a position, as I am now, to tell my grandkids that I made a difference. Because ultimately, our time on this earth is finite, and all you can hope to do is to do good deeds, and make a difference, while you are here, and then pass on the lessons you learned in that process to the next generation behind you. So, I would tell anybody who's thinking of getting involved, it doesn't have to be a full-time thing. You don't have to put the rest of your life on hold, but do something that'll make your grandkids proud of you. Do something that you can tell them you did, and that'll be the ultimate satisfaction, I think. And you can contribute—whatever skill set you have, or whatever desires you have, you can contribute something to these movements.

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1:03:05 T.E.

**Thank you for that, and to cap it at the end—close out my questions, specifically, we had discussed it a little bit, but what**

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**makes you excited for the future of the environmental justice movement?**

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**10:03:22 J.S.**

Young folks! Young folks. As I said a little earlier, Tashia, I think your generation understands the intersectionality of these struggles in a way that my generation did not. We were, in many ways, in silos. You had the Women's Movement over here, you had the Gay Rights Movement over here, the Labor Movement over here, the Civil Rights Movement over there, Environmental Justice Movement in a different place, everybody was—it was sort of like children doing parallel play; They were all playing, but they weren't playing with each other. I think your generation, really—it would take a book that I could not write to explain it—but I think it partly has to do with just the changing demographics of our country, that your generation is just so diverse. And I think because of your life experience understands—I mean, even... a slice of Republicans your age understand the concept of marriage equality and gay rights, in a way that would not have been true many years ago. So, I think your generation really gets the intersectionality of struggles at a gut level, and since y'all will be here a lot longer than me, at this point, I think that's what makes me the most hopeful, to see young people involved and active and militant and determined—and not scared by the array of forces against us. So that really makes me the most helpful—hopeful. So, no pressure, but you guys got this!

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**1:05:28 T.E.**

**Thanks, Jon. I'm really grateful for this conversation that we've had today. Is there anything else you wanna discuss, maybe that we haven't been able to speak about?**

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**1:05:40 J.S.**

No, I don't think so. Thank you for doing this, first of all. I know when Will (William Barber III) contacted me, he made the point about oral history traditions in this country, and particularly with the African American community—and it's really true, a lot of these stories would be lost, but for the fact that folks like yourself are documenting them so that people in today, certainly, but (also) in future generations can understand how these struggles came about, how they progressed, and what relevance these struggles have to



struggles in the future. So, thank you for doing this work. It's important work, and I'm glad that you all are doing it.

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**01:06:33 T.E.**

**Of course. And lastly, is there anyone else that you think we should talk to? I have a little list here, maybe if you bring up a name, I can Command-F and see if we're already talking to them?**

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**01:06:40 J.S.**

Well yeah, so, I think I made that point in one of the earlier emails—I've been very active, and pretty well-known in circles in Virginia for the work I've done, but the people who you really need to talk to, I think, are the people on the frontlines in Union Hill. People like John and Ruby Laury, Marie Gillespie, Chad Oba. (I'm) forgetting her name but Rose, Miss Rose<sup>6</sup> we call her, but the people in Union Hill. Kate Ferguson, who doesn't live in Union Hill, but is an environmental activist in Virginia, who's retired at this point, but played a key leadership role—and still does, in many ways—in the fight on the Atlantic Coast Pipeline and the Mountain Valley Pipeline.

Those would be sorta the first names that come to mind. Jessica Sims, who is a younger woman who works for Appalachian Voices and has been one of the key leaders of the Environmental Justice Movement, here. So, I don't know if you have any of those names, but those would be the names that come to mind. Russell Chisholm, who's the (managing director) of the POWHR Coalition, who lives in Giles County. He's a retired U.S. military (man), and he's been very active on the pipeline and environmental justice fronts. I'm sure I'm forgetting some other people, but those are the names that come to mind.

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**01:08:29 T.E.**

**No, that's all right, thank you. I was actually going to ask if you would feel comfortable just sending me a list of these names via email, and we (can) follow up there. We can exchange emails or I can extend an invite, you could connect us via email, with me cc'd—I don't know, we can discuss logistics via email. But I definitely think that those are the folks that we need to be**

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<sup>6</sup> Ella Rose

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**speaking with. And I agree with you wholeheartedly, and I'd love to get the ball rolling on that.**

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**01:09:06 J.S.** Are there other folks working on the Virginia piece of this, besides you? Is anybody in contact with these folks?

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**01:09:12 T.E.** **I... don't know. We're not working specifically—I'm not working specifically with a Virginia piece, per se. We are collecting folks who are interested in the project into a running document so we can make sure that we are getting in contact with these folks. And so, I was connected with you, because... luckily, I had the time to connect with you, and I'm glad that I got chosen to host this conversation between us.**

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**01:10:00 J.S.** Any time Will (William Barber III) asks me to do something, the answer is always “yes” before he even asks. He's a good guy, as is his dad,<sup>7</sup> for sure. But I would say the folks in Union Hill. And some of them are elderly—John and Ruby Laury, John Laury in particular, was one of the big leaders of this movement; He's in his mid- to late-70s. I don't know if he does Zoom, you might have to interview him in his living room, but he's just a good soul, that can tell you about the community of Union Hill.

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**01:10:43 T.E.** **Well, luckily, there are some resources for us to possibly travel and do some of these in person, of course—especially when we're getting into connecting with our elders; COVID has kind of interrupted our ability to navigate oral histories in a physical way. But I'd be glad to connect with these folks and see if they're interested in maybe starting some sort of process, whether I set up a recording over the phone or... yeah, I think where there's a will, there's a way.**

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**01:11:21 J.S.** Yeah, you should—I mean, obviously you're interested in this work, but in particular since you're focused on African American history, the Union Hill story, that is just about as compelling a story of environmental justice as I've ever seen. And it's actually—my entrée into this was I wrote an article in 2017 on Union Hill, and that sorta

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<sup>7</sup> Reverend William Barber II

got me going, and I think (it's) fair to say, got the movement going in Northern Virginia, at least, to support work on this. But that story, given your interests, I think that story would just grab you `cause it's such a window into learning—there's other historic African American communities that were founded by free men and women, certainly, in the United States, but this one in particular, the story is just... compelling. And it has a good ending, `cause we won. So it's an important fight to understand, to really dig into the facts. But thank you for doing this. This is great. I hope I haven't bored you too much with my rants but—

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**01:12:42 T.E.**

**No, you didn't bore me at all. I had a really good time. I was actually thinking—hold on, let me, I guess I'll pause this recording because I have to transcribe it later...**

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