



In collaboration with
Coach Marquetta Dickens
 Founder & CEO of Freedom.Org

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Interviewers: Rian Tuzcu and Campbell Melton

00:00:00	Rian Tuzcu	Yeah, so do you wanna introduce yourself a little bit maybe for us?
00:00:03	Marquetta Dickens	Yeah! ...My name's Marquetta Dickens. I am co-founder and CEO of FreedomOrg... I'm... born and raised in Edgecombe County—different parts of—but I call Princeville home; That's where my family is from... and so... that's where I call home, and that's where most of my advocacy... work happens, today. So... super excited to... just share with you all some perspective—my perspective, I think, will be very different... perhaps, from some folks who've studied environmental justice. How I got into this work will probably be a bit different—or not—from most other... people of color... Probably not [<i>Laughs</i>].
00:00:48	R.T.	Yeah, that sounds great! So, also, I wanted to include, since we are kind of combining the pre-interview and this full interview, are there any questions from the interview guide—if you were able to look over it—that you want to maybe avoid, or emphasize, to really kind of steer this in the direction that

		you wanna take it?
00:01:06	M.D.	Yeah, in all honesty, I didn' get a chance to look at everything in its totality, just yet—
00:01:12	R.T.	—That’s okay!—
00:01:12	M.D.	— So, if you all don't mind, if, like, something comes up, I may ask a question... when you ask that question... Or if I say... “I'd rather not answer that question at this time”—
00:01:21	R.T.	—Of course!—
00:01:22	M.D.	And we can just roll with it like that, if that's okay?
00:01:24	R.T.	Yeah, that's... perfectly fine! I just wanted to, just in advance, ask that, so, I appreciate that—
00:01:30	M.D.	—I appreciate you. And... I am neurodivergent, so I may just naturally drill down on some things—
00:01:37	R.T.	That’s okay... yeah!
00:01:38	M.D.	[Something] I’m more passionate about, and I think you’ll just get a feel... <i>[Audio cuts out]</i> ... who may be a... bit more knowledgeable in some of these areas, but I’ll give you what I know.
00:01:51	R.T.	Yeah! That sounds perfect, and the passion will show, so that is totally okay. I’m—I look forward to it! ... Campbell, do you wanna start off with the first question?

00:02:01	Campbell Melton	Yeah... So, we wanted to start off just with a little bit of... your personal history... So, just focusing in, can you share maybe some of your earliest memories, growing up in Princeville, North Carolina? What was it like living there—do you remember, as a kid?
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00:02:16	M.D.	Yeah! For me, it was very family-oriented, because I had family on both sides of my grandparents. And when we lived in Princeville, I live[d] [in] an apartment complex behind my grandparents... so real—the apartment complex was in between my grandparents' home and my great-grandparents' home; Because it was her former land—I learned much later in life, in my 30s, or early 30s/late 20s, that... apartment complex was actually my great-grandmother's land that she sold, which in turns, made her one of the earliest developers in Princeville, and North Carolina, in terms of modern development as we know it today. So, I thought that was really cool to kind of learn, down the road... And that just kind of... hits on some of your questions that I know you're gonna ask later, since I did see a few—since I did see a few of `em, in terms of inspiration, but... Yeah, so that, and just being... I remember fruit trees bein' everywhere, like palm trees. We had fruit trees in our backyard... almost everybody had a garden.... And it was almost like a bartering system, where if you didn' have anything, you would go up the street or next door to your cousin's house to get it, and if they needed something, vice versa. I remember the community stores... Because they were owned by people that your family knew, so... it was safe to walk to the store and get you—take a dollar and get 100 pieces of candy... And, just most recently, I found out that... that story that I talk about in the documentary, Miss Lollybell, she actually recently just passed away—it's my god-mom's mom... but her husband is my cousin, and I never knew that in all 39 years that I lived. So, it's just a lot of close-knit ties that I remember, growing up as a kid... I don't remember lacking anything as a kid, if I'm quite honest... And so, realizing that we're one of the most distressed... counties in the whole state, it was news to me, because that's just not the memory that I had growing up... We had stores, we had a grocery store, we had [a] police department, we had all of the things. And so, yeah... that's my memory of... this being close-knit, family-oriented. It was a lot of love, lot of love.
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00:04:39	C.M.	Okay. Yeah, that's great to hear. I mean, I... I think it's amazing that... it's really neat to see how close... families were, and the community was—that... as a kid, that you're not realizing the different pressures and stressors that are coming into your community like that until you—
00:04:59	M.D.	—Yeah—
00:04:59	C.M.	—get a little bit older...
00:05:00	M.D.	Yeah!
00:05:03	C.M.	... Yeah, and I wanted to ask next... you kind of touched on this a little bit, but maybe you could give a little bit more insight... Who or what inspired you to kind of pursue leadership... in environmental justice and community development?
00:05:16	M.D.	Yeah, honestly, let me... It was—I never had that language. When I sat out to do this work, it was never about quote-unquote “environmental justice.” I didn' even know that's what the hell we were doing... until someone else was like, “Hey, the work you're doing is climate action.” I'm just like, “What's that?” <i>[Laughs]</i> It's just a matter of... I am a[n] engineer mind, right? Like, I went to NC State because it was one of the top engineering schools in the country. That's just how my brain works. I took engineering throughout high school. It's just, like I told you before, I am neurodivergent, so, how a[n] engineer analys—analytic brain works is just natural and normal for me, and so, it comes with ease. And so, as I got older, I really got more into spirituality and learning more about myself, my heritage, where I come from, and that was kind of some work that really happened as I became a... trained therapist. And so, from there, Hurricane Matthew happened, and the governor at the time called my community the poorest of the poor. And you just heard my experiences from my childhood, and that pissed me off. And I'm an athlete, and so... and I was a coach at the time, and I was doing a lot of advocacy work—LGBTQ advocacy... work, ethnic minority

		advocacy work, women... advocacy work in athletics and sports in the NCAA, and I'm just like, I'm doin' all this work for everybody else and all these other communities, and my community is actually really suffering right now. And so, one of my friends at the time invited me back home to do... basically... to help give out things and resources and clothing and things like that for the community, in a distribution drive that she had created. And so, from there, it was just like, 'Okay, I need to do something at home.' And I started to do the research. I started to understand what the issues were. I learned more about the levee systems. I learned more about the levee system as it equates to Princeville, North Carolina in itself... and just our location, how we got there in the first place. So, I started to learn all of these things, and I wanted to be a part of the recovery, but I also wanted to be a part of the larger conversation about how do we fix this injustice... where we are, how we got here in the first place, and use some of the most innovative ways to do so... Because we're here now, and we're not moving, we're not leaving anywhere, because again... land is wealth in this country. It was one of the first means of wealth, in terms of generational wealth. So why would you wanna strip us of that, after we've worked so hard to get it—legally to <i>finally</i> be able to own land, and this is the first lands that our families are able to own and you just wanted to say, "Oh, just forget about it." It doesn't work that way... And so, I started to learn more about it. And so, my own family ties was a[n] inspiration. My grandmother was... the mayor in 1999, and she had the tie-breaking vote to not buy the entire town out... essentially. So, learning about that history, learning about my great-grandmother Maggie Perkins, who lived in Princeville for a century, now—she moved... to Princeville in between the 1920s and the 1930s, based on the research that I was able to do. And so, just knowing my history, my family's legacy in Princeville... inspires me to continue to do this work... that I'm doing today. And just knowing that... I'm literally connected in some type of family ancestral way to almost everybody, if not
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		everybody—if they've been rooted in Princeville for decades, my family and their family are tied [in] some way, shape, form, or fashion. So, for me, this work becomes very personal; This is not just a business venture where I think environmental justice is cool and it's something that we should do, and I believe in it; It's just like, I have no choice but to believe in it for the sake of my community... It was kind of forced upon us. It's nothing that I could just pick up and put down, even if I don't call it environmental justice, that's just what it is... And a lot of times, that's what it was for me. I just... I didn't have the language to say, “This is exactly what we're doing.” It's just, “Hey, this is the problem, here's the issues,” but when you see that you're not the only person and it's a collective issue, across this country and... across the world, globally, it's like you['re] feeling more solidarity, you feel more hope to be able to do this work. So, I'm inspired by a lot of different things. I'm inspired... just to kinda sum it up, I'm inspired by my family ties to this work and this land, as stewards. I'm inspired by the work of young people... like yourselves who want to continue this work for communities that you may not even be a part of, but you see the injustices and you wanna be a part of shaping that... and changing that... I'm inspired by... just the... beacon of hope, and the innovation that comes from things like flood mitigation, and how do we... collectively come together... and be a part of something bigger than ourselves... in a[n] innovative and collective way. So, I'm inspired by all of those things, and that's—those are the things that really fuel me to keep going and doing this work.
00:10:35	C.M.	Yeah, that's... amazing to hear. And that... kinda ties... into my next question, a little bit. I was gonna ask... how did your experience—growing up in a historically... significant Black town, how did that influence you? You talked a little bit about... the land you guys had already acquired, that you worked so hard to get that and—

00:10:52	M.D.	—Right—
00:10:52	C.M.	—you don't wanna give that—can you talk a little bit more about that?
00:10:55	M.D.	Yeah, and... it's another one of those situations where, again, I didn' know the history or the relevance of Princeville, North Carolina, as it [per]tains [AO1.1]to Black or American history. I had no idea growing up... that I lived in the first town ?? [AO2.1]by Blacks in America. I had no idea... And so, for me... in all my advocacy work, no matter what it is, I always say, and... most advocates will say that representation matters. And so, having Black homeowners around me, having Black-owned stores around me, and entrepreneurs around me... it was the norm, for me growing up... And so, when I set out to do it for myself, it's nothing new. It doesn't feel—it was... one less barrier, mentally, that I had to overcome, that 'I couldn't do this,' because I['ve] already seen the examples of what I could do and what I could become right in my own community... My grandmother's a[n] educator, my great-grandfather's a—was a[n]... associate professor at North Carolina A&T. My grandfather worked at a Carolina—at the telephone company and retired. Like I said, my great-grandma owned blocks of land. So, it was the norm for me to be successful. I didn' know anything else. So, for me, seeing this Black success and Black excellence set a standard very, very early... for me growing up, personally.
00:12:16	C.M.	I think that's amazing that you had those role models in your life, and you... I think it's very important for youth to kind of grow up knowing... 'you can do anything'... that... success is not... it shouldn't be somethin' that... scares you; It should be somethin' that really invites you in, that you can strive for around your life—

00:12:38	M.D.	—Yeah, for sure—[but] it’s a different type of pressure, I mean, if I'm honest. Then you have to grow up with... society tells you that you're less than, and so you have this—when you know you're actually greatness—and so, you have this complex where, sometimes you feel like you're an imposter, and so you deal wit’ imposter syndrome, when you go out into the world outside of what you grew up in—what looks like you grew up in... together... and be a part of something bigger than ourselves... in a[n] innovative and collective way. And so, you deal with that different type of pressure where you're coming from a community that's full of Black success and excellence, that you go out into a world that says, “Actually, you're not that great.” And... then you have to put on this facade and, like, figure out ‘Which one am I? Am I what society says, or am I what I actually seen [AO3.1]?’ ... And so, you have some people who don't come from that, and so, that's a whole `nother hurdle and obstacle, and I understand that people look at me and see success, and it's like, “Well, there should be more success coming from your community,” but everybody didn' grow up in my household; Everybody didn't grow up the way that I grew up. So, you also have to... think about... and I'm a therapist, so I think outside of what you see, and the mental barriers and things that people have to overcome... And so those are the things that I am very, very fortunate to say that I haven't always felt as confident as I feel now about being the successful person that I know I am... It's very, very different now, than it had been as a kid. Leaving Princeville, North Carolina, going to NC State, [a] whole different world, whole different ball game... So, yeah, it took some time... Dealing with fear of failure is real. So that's... that's another barrier that people just don't think about, but it's things that we're trying to implement in our programming, and... to help folks believe in themselves, first and foremost, in their communities, and know that they don't have to necessarily go outside of their communities or
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		stay outside of their communities; We're providing opportunities for them to come back and... not have to fight the... pressures of society, and the world who continues to tell you that you're less than, when you can come to a place where you feel greater than and you are—that is going to be elevated within.
00:14:55	C.M.	Yeah, we... definitely need more people around this world telling—uplifting people right now.
00:15:00	M.D.	—Yeah—
00:15:00	C.M.	—That's absolutely—
00:15:01	M.D.	—For sure—
00:15:01	C.M.	—super important... My next question, I wanted to ask... I know Princeville was—you already talked about the levees a little bit, and with flooding and stuff... can you talk about the particular events, maybe floodings, that happened in your life that kind of propelled you towards... you wanted to help Princeville the best you could?
00:15:20	M.D.	Yeah, so there were two in particular. The first one was 1999. I was 13 years old... And it was a very traumatic experience. Although I wasn't living in Princeville at the time, a lot of my family was. And I still get a little teary-eyed and emotional... talking about it, so... PTSD is real in our community and we don't, we don't really—and not just ours; Any... community who is it the forefront of climate change, there's a level of PTSD that's not addressed. And so, for me, those two events were... especially [Hurricane] Floyd [in '99], 'cause I was living here at the time, was very traumatic. And knowing that my grandmother was still in the town, trying to save everybody—as many people as she could to get them evacuated, as if she was some type of firefighter or something... I guess she threw on her Superwoman cape. But at that time... I recently had a[n] interview where I told my grandmother how

		angry I... was at her at that time... because I felt like... she shoulda came wit' family, she shoulda been there wit' us; Like those people have their own families, and they can tend to them, go get them, so on and so forth, but you're the matriarch of <i>ours</i> and <i>we</i> need you. But she just had this personal sacrifice, and now I understand it, as I became a leader myself in... 199—in 2016 when Hurricane Matthew came, and we were called the poorest of the poor, I understood where my grandma came from. I understood her... sacrifices, I understood why she did the things that she did, I understood the stressful nights and the long nights in the town hall meetings, being away from family, like, I understood it all. And it made me feel... such gratitude and a certain level of responsibility to carry on that legacy. Because I knew I had the means and the resources to do so. And the... knowledge. So, for me, those were two that propelled it. So, my grandmother was outta office in Matthew, and so she didn' have the political say in, to help the town recover in the way that she did in '99. And our town is literally still recovering from Matthew. I don't remember this gap. I do not remember it taking this long after... Floyd. We actually had new businesses come in after Floyd. So, for me to see my town like this, still after Hurricane Matthew, that... really propelled me to action, because now I'm older; Now I have more knowledge, and more experience, to be able to do some things... that I, I wasn't able to do in 1999. [And] we don't have the national support that we did in 1999. And so... it's... I would just say those are, yeah, those are the two events—flooding events—that really propelled me to do... to do this work.
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00:18:10	C.M.	Yeah... Yeah, I, I did some research looking at those floods, and... they were really destruct[ive], and—
00:18:19	M.D.	—Yeah. And happenin' two totally different ways.
00:18:22	C.M.	Yeah!

00:18:23	M.D.	One thing that we learned from Matthew is that the levy as we know it, it was not built to standard, it was not built to the 100-year-floodplain level that it was supposed to [be]. It's, maybe it's a couple feet too short—but, we, what we do know from research [is] that even if they had built to standard, we would not have stopped a Matthew or a Floyd. It wouldn't have stopped a Floyd because it woulda went over the top, still, and if it—it wouldn't have stopped a [Matthew] because... there's... flaws in the levee system. And so, it went around and under the levee system as we know it. Princeville, the town of Princeville ha[d] its own independent researchers... engineering firm come out, and they... came [up] with the same conclusions that the Army Corps of Engineers studies did a while ago. And so, we know what the issues are, we have identified them, NCDOT has admitted its wrongdoing, in Hurricane Matthew, where they did not have the coverts on the lev—on the highway, which is supposed to serve as a “levee,” which we know from research is way too low to be a levy. Although they... have asked the town, they asked the town and encouraged the town to abandon that portion of the levee where Highway 64 comes in. So now you're talking about, talking about community development—that's a whoooooole, a whole 'nother shebang, where our town is... victims of a highway. Sounds like a trend? Come and smack that... in through our town, and actually, most of the elders in our community says that the flooding got worse after that... And so... there's just this whole ordeal of different things and complications that's happening in this one town and one community, and... wit' administration turning over the way that it is, there was nobody staying on top of what's actually happened, what needs to change, and making sure that those changes were implemented. And so, that's where we see ourselves... really coming in and... doing that work. And so... if you don't do the research, that... stuff is lost.
00:20:25	C.M.	—Right—

00:20:25	M.D.	...Planning has to start wit' history and research, especially in the terms of environmental justice, 'cause, most of the community members who are elders that we've talked to talked of, yes, flooding, but the flooding was no further than midway to ya shins, so, which we know that that's typically what's gonna happen in low land; It's gonna come from the river, but it's gonna be a spread flooding, where the flooding is actually not gettin' into people['s] houses, but it will cause some inconvenience for a few days—but it's not property damage the way that it is now. So... all of those things... we're really, really trying to take our time, learn more about the levee systems, and what are flood-mitigation alternatives... and really what are the ancestral practices that we know happen in terms of natural flood mitigation, so that we're working <i>with</i> the land versus against it like levees and dams. Those are man-made things that just actually cause worse problems.
00:21:23	C.M.	Yeah. Yeah, it's kinda crazy to think that advancements are actually making these issues a lot worse in communities—
00:21:29	M.D.	—Yeah! That's because we stop. We don't continue to advance.
00:21:33	C.M.	Yeah!
00:21:34	M.C.	—Right? That—
00:21:34	C.M.	We find that... A lot of the time we find the cheapest alternatives to things—
00:21:37	M.D.	—Always—
00:21:38	C.M.	Yup.
00:21:39	M.D.	I'm sure you have learned about the... the CBA, the 'cost benefit analysis' in your work?
00:21:45	C.M.	Yeah.

00:21:46	M.D.	...Yeah, so, of course you are gonna do the cheap analysis, right? Of course we're gonna do the... cheap fix. And then, it makes communities like ours look selfish, and like we're wasting taxpayer dollars; It's like, no, <i>you</i> wasted taxpayer dollars when you gave us this bullshit plan in the first place and never—You know what I mean? Like, we knew that levies and dams would flood other places, and that dams were faulty and if they break, Western North Carolina, that catastrophic things could happen. We know that from the science, but we did it anyway, and we did not continue to put the innovative dollars and brainpower into, ‘Okay, this was a quick fix; How do we fix this thing long-term?’ ... There [are] things like dredging the rivers, making sure that communities have proper drainage... little things that, if we are the most innovative minds in the world, that we brag about, why is the Netherlands so far ahead of us when it comes to these type[s] of things? Why... is our infrastructu[re] in this country the way that it is? So... that’s more-so where I'm really trying to push because it's like, yes, our community needs help, but there are so many other communities that are goin’ through the exact same things because of things like the faulty infrastructure. Because you wanna fund the cheap things versus things that may cost more in the long run, but we're actually spending less dama—less money on property damage... So, it's just... a lot of... a lot of issues that I have with the way that things currently are. But, again, we go back to that hope where, there <i>are</i> leaders, new leaders—and some old leaders—who are more interested in hearin’ about long-term solutions, because of climate justice and climate change, because they're not just impacting Black and brown communities anymore...
00:23:42	C.M.	Right.
00:23:43	M.D.	...And so, so, it's like, ‘Okay, we—yes, yes, we can all agree that the earth is heating and cooling... at a certain rate, but can we all agree that humans have a huge... impact on that, too? And what can we do to change <i>that</i>, so it doesn't heat and cool so fast, and we all die?’ Like, come on! ...Maybe not us, but our generations... Your great-great-grandkids will definitely feel the effect[s] of climate change...

00:24:13	C.M.	Yeah!
00:24:13	M.D.	Period. And so... if we can start to get people to see it in that way—I mean, that's what we're hoping to do... long-term. But, people look at Princeville and they're like, “Oh, [that’s just] a Black town who sits in a low-lying area; They should know better, they should just move.” ... It's happening everywhere.

00:24:32	C.M.	Yeah, and I think it's important that you—that people stand their ground, in their land... I mean, it's easy to pick up and move, and go wherever... but it’s, it takes a lot more courage, and a lot more fight to really work for your own town...
00:24:47	M.D.	Yeah. And when you talk about community development, it's not easy to pick up and move either. You have people who own their homes and gettin’ a fraction of what it costs to build or to move to a new home, so what are they supposed to do? And these are elders who are on a fixed income. So, you[re] gonna give them essentially a down payment, for a new home somewhere else... The homes are undervalued in Princeville; We know that—by \$50,000, minimum. And so.. if you[re] gonna give me... \$90,000 for my home, and you want me to go find a new place to live, where am I going?
00:25:23	C.M.	Yeah.
00:25:24	M.D.	For \$90,000, where am I going? It, it's not even easy to pick up and move. It sounds easy though, don’ it? ... With the buyout programs, it sound[s] very, very easy: Just pick up and move! Okay, you take \$90,000, if that, and you go move somewhere, and not have to pay r—pay a mortgage after you've already paid your land and your home off; You go do it, and you tell me if that's fair and that's justice.
00:25:51	C.M.	Yeah, it's... I think the government has a—I mean just... so many problems with... even just talking about how they set up your town... the loopholes they went around and kinda shortcuts,

		engineering-wise and everything like that... I think it's really good that there's leaders like you, kind of standing ground there... trying to make substantial change there. I wanted to ask... as a leader there now, how has your experience... kind of... as a[n] athlete and a coach... throughout your life, how has that helped with your community advocacy... and kind of empowering your town?
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00:26:34	M.D.	Yeah... I'm a very spiritual person so... what I've known about myself in all my past lives, I've been a warrior for a very long time... And so, this is just normal and natural for me. And so, of course, some of the... biggest warriors were also the greatest athletes of our times, and those were the gladiators. And I just feel like this has just been my life, for lifetimes... And so, I'm just, was born into this, into this space, and it was the right timing for me to be born into this space, for me to use my natural and innate abilities to lead... And so, as an athlete, though, I was trained to do this work... I'm trained to... seek solutions and problems, and to gather game plans and to execute—to gather a team and to execute. That's what you do... as a coach, you are, it's your job to assemble a team—a really, really good team... that's gonna help you win... the NCAAs; Your conference and the NCAA. It's the same thing here.... It's assembling a team to, in the different areas where we know we really need to... really... have impact in our communities, is gathering those teams, and then be able to refine the talent... as they come and go... Being able to, as a coach, one of my things was, it's... not about wins—it's just wins and losses with us, and we damn sure don't train to lose; We always train to win, but it's not just the wins and losses on a scoreboard that we're training for. It's the win[s] and losses in life. How do you show up in the world? Are you a[n] advocate for yourself? Are you a[n] advocate for others? Do you seek to do and be a part of something bigger than yourself? Because if you have those qualities, it makes you a great teammate. And if you have the ability to follow, it makes you an even better leader, because you have to be able to follow to be a great leader.
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		So, we teach leadership and development in our... as I was a coach, we do the same thing—I do the same thing as a CEO with my staff. And so, my staff in terms, my staff do the same things as they go out into the community and they have the impact that they do. Their programming is, is really geared to having this personal relationship with the community. `Cause as Coach Yow¹ would always say, “People don't know what—don’t care what you know until they know you care.” So that's the approach that we have within our community, as well, is that we're gonna be... engaged, and we're gonna provide opportunities and space for people to come, as they are, and to build them, and build our community... into its best self. And that's no different for me, in this community work than it... would be for... any program that I would be a part of. The best part, the difference is that I get to run this organization. I get to create the policies, that are not biased towards people of color, but actually... celebrate... genius in young people... You know what I'm saying? If you come in, Rian, you guys come in with the expertise, you don't have to sit behind senior leadership who do nothing but leech off of your innovative ideas... So, I now get to create the systems... that I want to have to operate out of. And so now my employees feel 10 times better about themselves and the work that they do, so now they go out and be more impactful. And so... that's, to me, the biggest difference, is that in sports, I was kinda tied down to what the institution values were; Now I get to create those institutional values myself... And so, I'm super, super excited about it. I can still do that with sports—we're gonna be planning our own parks and recreation department, where we get to instill the values and systems. And so, we get to show other companies and other people what it looks like... We get to challenge people in different ways now. And so... that to me is taking that... spirit of a[n] athlete... of that dog mentality into whatever it is that you do. That's just gonna be me no matter what I do. I have a[n] LLC that's in development; Same thing... I don't move unless it's a need... unless it's a need for my community, and the folks that I'm working with. I don’t... I have to have a purpose, a
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¹North Carolina State University basketball coach Kay Yow

		deep-rooted purpose, to move. And it's the same way with sports, right? It's a passion, it's... to be a[n] athlete, a college athlete, a professional athlete, it is a certain level of insanity, discipline, and obsession you have to have, in order to be successful. And it's the exact same way with community work. It is gruesome of work. It is tiresome work. It is work that people don't appreciate. And it's the same thing—I think many coaches will say and feel the same way, so that's what I will say...
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00:31:30	C.M.	I... You mentioned... your mentor and coach, Coach [Kay] Yow. I wanted to talk about... I know shortly after her passing, you were part of an organization called GIT HYPE². I wanted you to talk about... that a little bit... How was lifting up the youth kinda different from... being a part of a team with older teammates and older coaches that you're used to being around?
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² Gathering Individuals to Help Youth Prosper & Excel

00:31:55	M.D.	Yeah, so GIT HYPE was my first baby... I actually... I started doing that when I was overseas, and I saw there was a lot of... gang prevention work that needed to be done in my city, and I knew that sports was a way that most people in my city connected. Again, it wasn't until later, when I learned how to do research, that I found out that... a quarter of people who come from low-income communities will play sports. That's a <i>huge</i> amount of people! And, if you know about Edgecombe County, you'll know that we're a tier-one community, and we're probably 98 out of 100 in terms of economic distress communities. So, a <i>lot</i> of people are connected through sports in Edgecombe County. So that was my way of... being an athlete and having the influence that I had, be able to get into and in front of folks, to help them create... yeah, basketball skills, but we always had a proponent—and then that first... those first camps, I partnered with the Sheriff[']s Department to come out and give gang prevention talks, conversations... So, it's always been something deeper than the sport for us... and for me in particular... Now I'm tryina' remember what GIT HYPE stand[s] for, 'cause it was an acronym, and that's why it was G-I-T. But yeah, that was just some of my... first works. And, I've always believed that... sports and community go hand in hand. Coach Yow always made us do community work. We always volunteer[ed]. We always gave back. We were always viewed as leaders, and we always had to view ourselves as leaders. And so, that's really what sparked it for me—is just this, taking that leadership role. One of my uncles was a sheriff at the time and we just connected, and I was like, “Hey, this is what I know I can do... based on the time and the experience that I have—it's the least that I can do.” And so, yeah, that's what we did; We provided free... sports camps, and provided some... background information, and... helpful, informative information for our, for our youth.
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00:33:59	C.M.	Yeah, that's amazing. I know sports, sports and community definitely go hand in hand. Growing up in sports and everything... it was always bigger than the sport; It's... teaching... the young people how to—I mean, it's their values, throughout their whole life, that you're learnin' through a lot of that stuff—
00:34:16	M.D.	—Just confidence... how to be collaborative, I mean—
00:34:20	C.M.	—So... now we're gonna... switch over, just a little bit different kind of questions. I'm gonna let Rian take over here...
00:34:30	M.D.	Okay.
00:34:31	C.M.	So, Rian, you can... go ahead and start with your first question.
00:34:34	Rian Tuzcu	Yeah, so, they aren't exactly super different. I'm just taking a, kind of a rewind to when we were talking about Princeville and community, and also your work with organizations such as FreedomOrg... I know FreedomOrg has the three pillars: historical preservation, agriculture, and community and economic development—
00:34:54	M.D.	—Right—
00:34:55	R.T.	—How do you see, within those three pillars, how do you see FreedomOrg address the challenges that Princeville faces? And, are there any specific projects or initiatives that you've seen that have kind of driven FreedomOrg?

00:35:09	M.D.	Yeah... I would say FreedomOrg... I think it's very important to note that FreedomOrg was formed around the needs of communities like Princeville, lit'rally. And so, we started with those three pillars based on the research that we have done, and we noticed that those were regional issues; They're not just Princeville issues, they're not just Edgecombe County issues, right? And, for me, in terms of economic development, and just any type of development, if you can really get a region—and especially flood mitigation—if you can go at a regional approach, it really... kinda shapes the foundation, and a funding pool for your communities, especially if you[re] looking to pull money from, like, the state and federal levels, right? And so... 'cause you're a tier one community—this region is mostly made up of tier one communities, and so we all need the same things. And so, our work at Freedom is... really to be a blueprint for regional issues. And so, like Edgecombe County has adopted Get Off the List³. And FreedomOrg ha[s] been reporting on those, those things on the list since 2019 when we formed as an organization. So, it's very inspirational to now see, even if we don't get the credit, that leaders in our communities are adapting to these things and starting to pay more attention and providing more... resources and time to the things that we have identified are issues in our community. Like lit'rally. And it's beautiful to see. It's frustrating because you don't get the credit at times, but it's inspirational to see because... as you become a leader and you seek influence, what I've come to realize, you—it almost becomes the norm, and it should be celebrated, when people take things that you've been harping on and they finally do it. Even if they don't give you the credit for it, they see the importance of it. And so, that's just really where we are... And I would say—and I'm not, I'm not bragging when I say this; It's really rooted in research, because the work that we do is rooted in research and data... And that's from us working with folks like Kofi
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³ "Get Off the Lists" is a community improvement initiative launched in 2022 by public officials in Edgecombe County, North Carolina

		Boone⁴, and After the Disaster⁵ and a... Andy Fox and NC State Coastal Dynamic[s] Lab, and how working directly with them and the experts that they have on hand, and us giving them ideas that we've had already formulated, and just working with the community to input more ideas; They already have a blueprint. So why will—you know what I mean? And so, our work is literally from this quote-unquote blueprint that's already been fleshed out in research and data. So, everything that we do here at Freedom... goes to what you just asked. It is an example... in ways that we can be impactful, in <i>everything</i> that we do, from agriculture to historic culture preservation, and what we're doin' in Wilson Cemetery—there are more historic cemeteries that could go on that... historic registry. From the work that we're doing in Wilson Cemetery—I'll just give you an example; The work that we did with... Wilson Cemetery, we partnered with UNC, in their... geography department, and their students came out and they mapped that cemetery for us. From there... now [Javier Arce-Nazario and Danielle Purifoy are] gonna open it up to... do the same work with other communities who may be in need. So, we are literally at the forefront... and with the work and the programming that we're doing. But that's literally how we were designed. We were never designed to <i>do</i> it all. We were designed to be facilitators, to do the research, to do the deep-dive research and the drill-down, and to essentially go find the resources, pull them together into one space and place, and if there were gaps, then we would provide, and be that resource for our community. But we were never about reinventing the wheel. I think there's amazing people across this state doing amazing things, and if we can come and bring them together to Prin—in Princeville—then we can do that across our region, and other communities. And so, it's just a model, and so, we're trying to be that cutting-edge model of essentially... how to template things to work and move in other spaces. So, everything that we do, I feel like is... what you just asked.
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⁴ Kofi Boone, FASLA is a Joseph D. Moore Distinguished Professor and University Faculty Scholar at NC State University. His work overlaps landscape architecture and environmental justice, with specializations in democratic design and interpreting cultural landscapes.

⁵ View the Greater Princeville report [here](#)

00:39:41	R.T.	Yeah, that was a great response. Everything is always so intertwined, in situations like this—
00:39:45	M.D.	—Yeah... especially in your rural communities, like you kinda have to be comprehensive. You can go to a big city like D.C. and focus only on food sovereignty, right, because you['ve] got public transportation. You don't have public transportation in rural... North Carolina... you know what I'm saying? And so, yeah, [in big cities] I can provide you with Uber, or whatever certificates from your community if you don't have a grocery store. [But] we ain't got that here [in rural North Carolina], so we have to be more comprehensive in our planning and our thinking, and <i>then</i> we drill down. And so, that's just how we're moving here, at Freedom. But again, I am a[n] engineer at heart and mind... I wish my great uncle was here. We talk[ed] earlier about inspiration, but he was a civil engineer, and the community development was one of the things that he wanted to be a part of, as well. And I... often sit and I just think about, 'Man, damn, we woulda had so many designs done by now, if he was still living,' you know? But now... I just try to hook up with other dope engineers, to get this work done; Takes a little bit longer, but... it'll get done.

00:40:53	R.T.	Yeah, thank you... So, kinda moving more into the historical preservation aspect, you mentioned community, and as well as some of the students that came out, mapped some historic cemeteries.
00:41:04	M.D.	Right.
00:41:04	R.T.	How do you see that intersection of that work with your overall work at Freedom? I know this is a little... kind of repetitive, so feel free to take it any direction that you'd like.

00:41:15	M.D.	I think it just in general, it goes into kinda what we're doing, right? The template that we're creating, that we're building, is how do we become partners with other folks who really wanna do this work, right? And so... UNC, your state institution, NC State, state institutions who are literally paid money to go out and work in communities in the state of North Carolina, but, they don't always have the opportunities if they're not invited by that community, said community. And so, what we're doing, in our, wit' history and culture—history and cultural preservation... for us, is tied into the same thing; It's a template. And so... in terms of historic culture preservation in general, in terms of FreedomOrg, it goes hand in hand wit' community development and agriculture. And so, gentrification, it's a real thing when you talk about community development. And so, we don't know the history of a space and a place, if we don't know the culture of this space and a place, then it's easy for us to erase it, even if it's with good intent. And so, that's why we enacted that organization—in addition to, of course, Edgecombe County, Princeville in itself is extremely historic. So that's the, what everybody thinks. It's like, “Oh, Princeville, of course you have historic cultural preservation.” Ah, yeah, we do, but we also need it for agriculture, and the justice and the injustices that are happening there for not just our Black farmers, but our middle-sized farmers here in Edgecombe County—both Black, White, and Latina... We also need that historical relevance and information and background for when we start to build new things in our communities. We are now more focused on environmental aspects, right, and so, we try to find spaces that once had development, versus tearing down new trees. So, all of that wraps into, so every single department really intertwines and interconnects with each other at FreedomOrg, and so they are not standalone opportunities; They are very much... they cross, in multiple programming and in multiple ways. Like, we lean on each other. And that's why we started it this way, before we set out to be our own individual entities... Because what starts to happen is, once you—as you start as your own individual... entity, you become siloed in your work, and you're not, you're not really intertwined in other spaces in the community, where they really, really need you. And
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		so, we're just, again, we're just doing it, we're just being a model, for other folks, in their own communities.
00:43:55	R.T.	Yeah, I mean, being a model is—it's the first step, especially in communities that don't always get a voice, it's the first step to kind of be that template.
00:44:04	M.D.	Yeah... I've been always told I was a trailblazer, 'cause I'm not afraid of much. But that's the athlete in me... And I grew up very—I'm a country girl; I grew up in the country. I grew up huntin', fishin', in the woods, building things, workin' with my hands, flippin' off ATVs, so... this is easy. Goin' out, talking to people, bein' a voice, that's the easy part. I actually still like to get my hands dirty. Like I'm ready for a demo. Like, you know what I'm saying? I'm just that gritty type o' leader, which in terms, the community feeds off o' that ⁶ . I'm not walkin' into meetings wit', as a CEO, wit' my suit on, and I'm not doing that, 'cause that's not what we're here for. We're very grounded, in the work that we do... and it's always people first... which gives us a very, very unique perspective, because we're not tailorin' to what state gover—state or federal government grants have to say. We don't operate in that way, as most nonprofits do. So, we don't have to pander, for federal and state dollars. We just, we move differently. That's why I can say what I say outta my mouth on documentaries—
00:45:18	R.T.	—Absolutely, yeah!—
00:45:18	M.D.	—in the way that I... And that's why I refuse to get into politics, as most people continue to ask me to do. Yes, at some point, one day, yeah, but my organization isn't built... in the way that I want it to [be] just yet, and I won't step away until it is. And so... we're in the process of gettin' everything written down... patent is not the right word to use, but maybe we should start to patent some things that we're doing, and trademark some things that we're

⁶ This is a sports reference Marquetta uses back home in Princeville. "We are known to be gritty players. By meetings I mean community meetings. Of course, I'll put on a suit when appropriate. Long story short, I'm a CEO that likes to be where the people are."

		doing... because I know that it's going to come with a lot of people wanting to replicate the work that we're doing for very selfish reasons, and it's nothing to do with the people. And we do not want that... can't handle how people take what you do and spin it for their own selfish gains, but we do want to just make sure that we are safeguarding our intellectual property at all costs.
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00:46:10	R.T.	Yeah, I can, I can see the drive, and the... pure passion about this organization, which kinda leads me to my next question. You... talked about your kinda analytical engineering background—
00:46:23	M.D.	—Yes—
00:46:23	R.T.	—I was wondering how your background has shaped the development of Freedom[Org], especially because it is a very community, youth-driven—you have summer camps, education camps—I was kind of wondering what that pathway was like in the beginning.
00:46:36	M.D.	Yeah, it's just how my brain works. So, it literally is the foundation of how we're moving. Like, what you all see is just the tip of the iceberg; What we have planned is so different—it's not different per se, but it is so more in-depth... And so, we have very detailed plans of what and how we wanna move, moving forward, based on how our society is shaping and changing. And so... we started a bit different, and just engineering—and so, it's not just my engineering mind; It's all o' my experiences shaped into one, is what this organization is. And so, naturally... neurodivergent, so my brain just already automatically sees things, and views things a bit differently. And I just have a great—and most of us here in our organization [are] a bit neurodivergent, so we understand each other in ways that at least most people won't, who will think what we[re] doing is very chaotic, and they just can't understand it, 'cause they're like, "What the hell kind of non-

		profit—you guys are here there, everywhere!” And then when I sit down and have a conversation [with them], they’re like “Ah, shit, that makes a lotta sense, that—ah, oooo, I never thought about it that way.” And I'm just like, yeah, most nonprofits fail because they all do the same things; They all start out depending on federal and state government grants. And then, the work gets great, and it gets good, and then the administration change[s] and then your work is... cease[s] to exist anymore, and then the communities you seek to help are back in despair, and they're back with this hopelessness 'cause another group came in, and now they're just disappeared. We didn't wanna be that. And so, for me, I'm a long-term-solutions... person. And so, when you talk about engineering, you need to know the nuances of things, you need to know the nuances of a community, and being that I'm from here, it gives me the advantage, it gives me the edge, right? But, therapist-wise, you gotta know what makes a community tick. So, we had started out doing all of our programming, and just came to the community and said, “Hey, here we are, wit’ all of our fancy programming, and [it] looks great,” versus startin’ out with the community engagement, startin’ out wit’ volunteering, and being in the community and entrenched in community, starting out wit’ educating the community, so that we make better-informed decisions. Had we started out differently, I don’t think people would be as accepting, and even now that I’m from here, we’re still having to build—especially in places like Princeville—we’re still having to consistently show up, all of the time, to gain, to get... 20 people in a community meeting. Because you have organizations that just come and go, because they can't... how they are designed, they can't operate without certain funding. We're just not... we’ve been very, very blessed to not have to design our work in that way. And so, for me, that engineer... mindset, and the counselor, that trained therapist mindset, and just my sheer experiences in life, and just my advocacy work, has allowed me to... initially set out a way that I wanted to see Freedom[Org] form... the foundation of Freedom set, and so, and its future, but it’s also has allowed me to be open to be flexible and have other ideas based on what the community's needs are and how they change...
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		The most successful nonprofits have the ability to be flexible and flex with the community needs. And so, we've just positioned ourselves to be that, and to be in that space. And so, that's just kind of, I guess how it all worked. I don't necessarily go in thinkin' about, "Oh, use your engineering brain right now." It just happens... It's just natural... And, so, yeah...
00:50:37	R.T.	Yeah—
00:50:37	M.D.	—One thing is built from... one thing builds on it from another. That's how engineering happen, right? You have to have a foundation, and... it just builds from there... Even down to software engineering, the same thing; That motherboard is extremely important. If that motherboard isn't right, then the functioning of that computer is not gonna work—regardless of... what type of fancy programs you have to put in there, if you can't read binary numbers, you're screwed! And so, it's the same thing about our community; If you can't connect to the community members, your organization means nothing, fa' real, fa' real... So, that's just how we're designed.

00:51:13	R.T.	Yeah, and it... is proven to be a successful design. I mean, you know your community best, so, that work is... very important to kind of be as—again, be a model for other organizations. Also, kind of switching gears a little bit, I know you're mentioned in the documentary <i>Freedom Hill</i>, talking about kind of environmental justice and your experiences. How do you—can you kinda talk about your experience being featured, and how your feature has influenced the conversation around environmental justice, either within your organization, [or] outside?
00:51:49	M.D.	Yeah, well, that film is really, what... really... made me have to accept and own the term 'environmental justice', and what we're doing here at Freedom[Org]. Resita [Cox ⁷] forced me in that position to have no choice [<i>Laughs</i>] —you know, I'm a worker bee; My head is down, I'm just like,

⁷ Director of the documentary Freedom Hill

		“Look, I ain't tryin’ a get caught up in whatever it is... I just wanna do the work.” And she's like, “Nah, Q, your voice is like, we need your voice; Like, this is what it is... we[’re] naming it, this is what it is, and this is how we're rollin’.” And I... understood her perspective, and how that, shaping that narrative was important, and how controlling that narrative was important. And so... I think that my voice there has... really gotten people to think about, “Ah damn, it's... it's not just that these... Black people wanted to live in this place; They ain’t have no choice”... And it kinda tells it—it tells it from a different perspective. That was my first time really learning about racialized... topography; I never knew that! But our historic preservation dev—director, she's like, “Yeah!” And she's breaking down the history of it. You know what I mean? And I'm just like, “Damn this shit is really all connected, this is crazy!” And so, if you don't understand, and you don't know the history of that, and how Maroon Towns⁸ came to be, and why they were there in the first place, it’s easy to say, “Pack up and leave, and just go; You shouldn’t’a ever been there in the first place.” Yeah, you tell... people across town that... we shoulda’ been over there instead, on high grounds with them—it never was gonna happen. And so, I just think that people speak from... a lotta time[s], people speak from a place of current events, and not how things were then. And so, to think that people of Princeville would not have chosen the higher ground, is just insane... And so... I read a quote today that talked about, like, slavery is... White history, but surviving is Black history... Places like Princeville is Black history, where, we ran—we literally ran to the Union campgrounds, in multiple places. Princeville is just one in North Carolina, that... started these Black-established towns, from... the Union soldiers’ camps. So, it's just little things like that for me, just like, yes, my voice is important in terms of environmental justice, but we can't forget the history and how we got to this place of environmental [in]justice, and why these communities are in the forefront of environmental justice—injustice—in the first place... Why is it
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⁸ A Maroon Town is a secure, independent settlement founded by formerly enslaved Africans who escaped captivity in the Americas and the Caribbean

		that people think they can just come and dump waste in poor and Black and brown communities. They weren't Black people in Pennsylvania when they took that cancerous nuclear plant. They were middle-class, low-income White families. They're not just, they're not just doing this to poor people, man; They're doing this to people who they feel are marginalized, and have little voice, and that community in Pennsylvania were mostly women... So, it's just like, this is crazy! So, for me, I think it's important that I continue to say, "Yeah, environmental [in]justice is wrong, but we need to tap into the hist'ry, because there's a lot wrong wit' our history, and we need to reconcile that, so that we can come to like real solutions, together, because it's not just my town that's suffering from environmental [in]justice—and flooding is not the only environmental [in]justice that there is; It's just the one that we're talkin' about right now, because hurricanes are getting' worse. But if we're talkin' about deregulatin' corporations, what do we think is about to happen? It is not just gonna be towns on the coast who are gonna be talking about environmental injustice. It's gonna be your urban communities, it's gonna be your Pennsylvanias, it's gonna be, "Idaho has cheap land, we can go out there, do some... cheap stuff out there... They have people far and few in between, we'll only be hurtin' a coupla people, it's okay." ... I don't think people are really—I don't think people are thinkin' ahead, and as a visionary, I always have to think ahead. And so... I take opportunities, when people talk about [the] <i>Freedom Hill</i> documentary and environmental justice in Princeville, I like to take the opportunity for you to think ahead, and it gives me a platform to make people think ahead of their own environmental [in]justices that can happen in their own communities, or the communities that where their families come from. Because pollution... it's just, it's gonna be just as dangerous—it already is; We just aren't talking about it, as much as we are flooding, 'cause you can see the flooding, you can see the property damage. You can't see lung cancer unless somebody's sittin' in front of a camera telling you about it, right? I remember watching that documentary about five years ago about that factory that came in Pennsylvania, and looking at the town now, and
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		these are like middle-class White women with these beautiful families talking about their lung cancer, and their children, and... them having, like, issues with respiratory issues now that they're like... this is, they're walking around with oxygen tanks in their 60s. Like, are you kidding me?! Like, that's not a problem for everybody?!... So, it's like for me, I like to be able to use my platform to talk about the broader issues, because again, it goes back to that, the more people that we can ding—can have on our sides, and we're all in this together, the bigger our voice is. Princeville alone talkin' about environmental justice is a very, very, very small voice—not too many people give a damn about Princeville or communities like Princeville. But, if we could talk about Princeville, we could talk about that place in Pennsylvania, that place over in New Jersey, all of the places that suffer from environmental [in]justices—even if you wanna group it to just regional conversations, I think that's just way more impactful.
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00:58:14	R.T.	Yeah, and, you... that's a great segue... We actually have some questions next—I think Campbell's gonna ask like one or two... about large-scale, and how, kind of get more in-depth on exactly what you were talking about.
00:58:29	M.D.	Awesome!
00:58:32	Campbell Melton	Yeah, so, you already touched a little bit about... this should be... there should be different people in different communities... all communities talking about... what's going on in their towns, these environmental injustices that are occurring in them—
00:58:48	M.D.	—Yeah!—
00:58:49	C.M.	—So, I was gonna ask you, kind of... what lessons from Princeville's experiences so far, just being in that area, what do you think can be done to apply to... other historically Black communities... Or, maybe it's not other Black communities--maybe it's just other communities in general, like that Pennsylvania one you were talking about, facing... threats like that?

00:59:12	M.D.	I feel every community needs a[n] advocacy group, a[n] advocacy group that's gonna stay in between administrations. A lot gets lost between administrations, right? ...Administrators and councilmen and [council]women say they love the town, and that's why they ran, but when their term is over, they're outta there. They're not sticking around to train the next commissioner, 'cause they ran against them. It becomes very personal, and very political. And without nonpartisan groups in your community, your community will also be very politicized. And we refuse to allow that to happen in ours. Our goal is to help other communities formulate their own advocacy groups, and then be able to help those advocacy groups implement the things that they need, right? FreedomOrg doesn't wanna go into every community and be its advocacy group. We don't know the nuances of every community. We don't have the capacity, nor the desire to do so, right? We want to empower the folks that are already there. So, for us, it looks like: Who's in the Town Hall meeting talking the most? Who's organizing outside of local government? What are they advertising, or advocating for? How does it align with our mission here at Freedom? What resources does that community or that advocacy group need? How can we give them the things that have helped us be in a place of influence the way that we are... within their own community? 'Cause FreedomOrg shows up in meetings where... there's town managers, mayors, and county officials; So, there's rarely any—you know what I mean? We... we need more community groups in those meetings. So... for us, the broader vision is, again, is to be a model, is to be a model, for other organizations to be able to do the same. And, and teaching those leaders how to be in—end up being in a room and you're being called because you're the expert of your community... Like, I most recently, I got appointed to the Tar River Basin—Tar-Pamlico River Basin Advisory Group—which is a part of North Carolina's biggest investment in terms of... the flood blueprint. So now my voice is in that room. I look around, there's one official, there's one county official, the mayor of Princeville's supposed to be there [but] he's not there. So, who represented Princeville that day? Who
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		would have if we weren't there, right? So, like, this is what I—this is what I mean. Like, especially in rural communities, these officials are getting stipends; This is not their full-time job. And so, we have gotta... there's too much dependency on government for me. And so, what we're trying to do is get people decentralized from government, to being proactive in their own lives, and in their own liberation, because we have gotta get to that place, because then we become the voices. When you're entrenched in and you know the problem[s], then you can advocate to your legislator. And now you have the language to do so, and you have the influence and the power as a community group. So... so, it's just a lot of different things that... we—again, it's all written out and we have, we have plans. But... with our capacity and the work that we're doing here, it's... just one thing at a time—or maybe three, 'cause we have three departments; Three things at a time. So, yeah, did I answer that question?
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1:03:17	C.M.	Yeah, yeah, I think—yeah, just emphasizing... you guys are being a model, showing that you gotta have those community members being advocates for those groups. I mean, politicians aren't—like you said, if that, the mayor wasn't there, who was gonna do it that day? Who was gonna represent you guys that day and be your voice?
1:03:36	M.D.	Right.
1:03:37	C.M.	And that kinda... goes into the next question a little bit... With those... tryina' find community members to... outreach, and going against politics sometimes—pro'lly a lot of the time, what are some of the biggest barriers, to achieving some of your environmental justice goals, engineering goals—
1:03:56	M.D.	—Yeah—
1:03:57	C.M.	—on a systemic level?

1:03:59	M.D.	I think it's... nationwide at this time. People are just feeling like it's nothin' I can do... it's nothin' I can do, it's out of my reach, I don't have that type of power to change it. And, as a collective, people are buying into that... And so, that's the biggest thing. Also, from previous efforts not being executed, people are... just like, "This is just gonna be another one of those..." And so, you have to constantly show up, constantly be engaged, which takes away from... Your community engagement, although it is very, very necessary, takes away from a lot of your planning, and things that actually get... the conversations that you need to have wit' funders and so on and so forth, to get you ahead to implement... those higher-level projects, right? And so, being that I am our CEO and our community economic development leader, I have to run those community conversations. But I have to have them in order to be able to go to high-level research, with the data from the community, to be able to create that high-level planning... So, it slows us down because of the capacity, but nobody's like, "Hey, here's another \$4 million for you to go hire people to do this work." Not many people are gonna do that. And again, like I told you, we're not relying on state and government funding, for our employees' salary—maybe for our programming... and that's getting a little bit scarce... So, we have to be innovative and find ways to be sustainable... for us, and so, yeah. I, I think—ask that question one more time so I make sure that I'm...
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1:05:54	C.M.	Yeah... just asking you kinda what are some of those biggest barriers that you're going against?
1:05:59	M.D.	Yeah, the barriers. So, yeah, it's just, one... is having the... having the hope, and... having the hope from constituents, from citizens, to wanna be a part of this, right? You have people who feel hopeless, you have people who feel they don't have the power—that they're not powerful enough to be able to make change, that their voices don't really matter anyway, you['re] just gonna do what you wanna do, the government's just gonna do what it wants to do, so why waste my time? You're also

		dealing with folks who lit'rally do not have the time. You're talking about a tier-one community where families and... parents are having to work two to three jobs just to make ends meet, so, they don't have the time to be out at a community meeting... We also ran into barriers around being able to hire people with the level of expertise you're looking for, in said community, because what happens in rural communities: brain-drain. I'm... a victim of that. I promise you I was never, ever planning on coming back here. And most of us do not ever, ever plan on coming back here. Right? And so, the... community development was inspired by me saying, "Hey, if I'm gonna come here and do the work, then I want to be able to create an environment where I would want to raise children; Where more people with the experience and the knowledge to help our community will be willing to come back to and raise their children, too." And so, that's the inspiration behind what levels of community development we... want to do. And people look at me crazy like, "You wanted to do [it] in Edgecomb County?" Like, "Hell yeah, why not? Why aren't we deserving?" ...So, it's, those are some of the barriers that we have, is that we don't have local government, who can support us in the ways that we would be supported in our development in a place like a Raleigh. There are no development grants in Tarboro. There are no development grants in Edgecombe County, per se. Rocky Mount, it's the city of Rocky Mount has development grants, but that's a metropolitan city, which is combined of both Edgecombe and Nash counties. Most rural communities that we're dealing with here, like Princeville, don't have that. So, in order to—we're also dealing with issues of... what's the word I'm looking for? ... declining population is an issue. So, when you have... what's the word... lack of innovation, innovative leaders and thoughts, at our local levels, we ain't got it. Most of them have been there for 20-plus years. Same thoughts, same ideas. Town manag—county manager's been there for forever. And we do... and we... we talk about affordable housing, it's how do we... we talk about utilities, and send information out on how to save water versus talking about
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		county infrastructures... So, those are our barriers, is that we have leaders also in places who are not thinking outside o' the box very well, for our communities. And so, a lot of that falls on our nonprofit, when we aren't necessarily in... power, per se to just say, "Hey, let's do this," and it's done. We have to go and advocate, expand... our resources and our time, to advocate for these things. Well, for me, it's a no brain—it should be a no-brainer, that you would do infrastructure research around why water bills are 300-some'n dollars. Why is one community paying 50-something dollars more than another, but you['re] in the same, on the same water system... We don't, those are barriers, so, our citizens are bogged down with those level issues, where they're having to pay 3/400-dollar light bill[s], water bills, they don't have time to come out and talk about alternative flood mitigations. Like, first of all, I'm trying not to get evicted, I'm tryina' keep my lights on, I'm just tryina' keep food on the table. So... as much as I want more people to show up, I am empathetic to what they're dealing with... and I'm gonna show up for them; That's why I get paid, that's what I get paid to do... And so, it's just, those level barriers, this is... it's a[n] extensive amount of barriers, and you got barriers for our citizens, you got barriers for our nonprofit... our leaders—they have their own set of barriers. I am... how can I say this in a nice way? ... I'm prob'ly a little less empathetic to leaders who chose to be leaders, than I am to citizens. 'Cause you chose that role, so you can choose to educate yourself, you can choose to form and be collaborative wit' organization[s] like ourselves; We're not hard to find. We do the work, we show up... So, yeah, I think it's barriers from all... multiple levels: Citizens, government, local government. I mean, we all know the state and federal government, I mean, that's just, it is what it is. We can't necessarily control that, outside of controlling who we vote for in our general assembly, and who we vote for in our area, but we're just one part of that, and one small percent of that vote for the larger senate—the senators, and so on, so forth, so, yeah.
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1:11:41	C.M.	Yeah... Thank you for that response. And I think some of that... especially what you highlighted in the beginning, just the kind of lack of hope throughout, not even just Princeville, but... throughout the nation. Especially when, like, new administrations come through, how you talked about... “Oh, that's just another one of these”—I think Rian has a few questions talking about just looking forward... where we can find that hope, kind of later on—
1:12:07	M.D.	Okay!
1:12:08	Rian Tuzcu	Yeah, so this is kind of our last set of stripped questions, and then maybe... we can branch out if we have some time...
1:12:15	M.D.	Mhm.
1:12:15	R.T.	But again, looking forward, how do you see—I know the ‘environmental justice’ is a term that is used widely, but in... your sense of environmental justice, especially with Freedom[Org] and your advocacy work, how do you see it evolving and changing in the next 10 to 20 years in Princeville?
1:12:34	M.D.	...I see it evolving and changin’ in... ways where, I think we—I just see it more evolving, not necessarily changing, ‘cause we already set the foundation, and now we[’re] just essentially implementing what the foundation is. And so... what I see it looking like in the future is... a[n] innovative hub for thought leaders, [and] experts in the field to come together, and this is a space where we... implement our ideas... where we really—and we not just implemented it and keep going, but it is a place we continue to come back to. And so, when there is research that needs to be done on... levy system maintenance or whatever flood mitigator—[miti]gation—maintenance that it's gonna be, that this is a place that we come back to. [We] say, “Hey, students, this is how we maintain... a man-made lake, so that it doesn't create pollution, and all o’ the other things that we know man-made lakes create,” right? This is a place... so, I foresee it being

		a[n] innovative hub, where I foresee it being very futuristic. That's just me, though! ... And I do—I see it being... I see it being a place of respite and a place of research. And I say respite because it will be still your small town. It's gonna still have your small-town feel, it's still gonna have your small-town aesthetics, but there will be space dedicated to research and thought-provoking thinkers and leaders, in this environmental justice work. I think we have to establish that for ourselves. We want to be that. That's who we wanna be... It's a place where NCDOT can come and say, “Hey, we really screwed up on this highway in Princeville, man; How can we work with the community now to... make it better?” It's a way for them to learn how to have some redemption for their organization and their community themselves. We're actually doing that through N—with NCDOT, and... they are doing work with NC State and we're one o’ the partners in that, and, how did they work across communities in the state on a map [of] African-American and Native American burial grounds... Why can't we be that for flood mitigation, too? That's how I see us in terms of environmental justice, throughout—and, and from flood mitigation, we... move on to things like the other environmental [in]justices; I... would <i>love</i> to see us be all solar... Like, that's the place that I see us... bringing in... us talking about using—utilizing agriculture in innovative ways for flood mitigation, and so on and so forth, to have more spaces where we are suckin’ that carbon out of the air... So, I see Princeville being that in terms of environmental justice... showing the world in very practical ways that their community can still be empowered to be a part of the change. And if we can get each individual communities to feel empowered, can you imagine the collective power we[’d] all have together? ...So that, that’s where I see Princeville: a physical place for people to come to and say, “If they can do it here, we can do it where we're from, too.” That's, that’s where I see the Princeville in the Environmental Justice Movement.
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1:16:09	R.T.	Yeah, I said it before... I'll say [it] again, your passion really, it really shows, and looking so far ahead and seeing... how your community will—and others—will evolve is... it's something I really admire, so, I appreciate that...
1:16:23	M.D.	Thank you. I appreciate that.
1:16:26	R.T.	... Kind of winding down... is there any advice that you may have for any younger—either younger generations, or even people in general that are looking to get involved in environmental... advocacy, especially community-driven?
1:16:42	M.D.	Yeah—
1:16:43	R.T.	—And then [to] add on to that, how, if they were interested, how would they get involved with Freedom[Org]?
1:34:48	M.D.	Okay, okay. So, the first question was—
1:16:50	R.T.	—Yeah—
1:16:51	M.D.	—the advice for young people wanting to get involved in the movement, right? My advice to all young people, and this is the first question that I ask my players the first week we meet is: you need to—what is your purpose? What is your why? Why [do] you do the things you do? What is your purpose? What's driving you? ... Who are you, first of all—you need to know who you are! You know what I mean? Because in this work, everybody will tell you who you supposed to be... Like Rian, why are you so involved in that? ... You privileged, you should be, you ain't got—you know what I mean? Like people are going to try to tear you down, try to tear you down. And you need to have a strong foundation and a strong base of who you are and why you do what you do... And from there, then you go get your technical training, in whatever field that it may be. If it's environmental justice, perfect. Because we know when you go into that field, you're gonna have a purpose and you're gonna have a reason and you're gonna be solution-

		focused. So, my advice is figure out who you are, figure out your <i>why</i>, and sometimes figure out why you are the way that you are. It could be some generational stuff goin' on there, it could be a little bit of nature versus nurture, but you need to figure that out, right? Go to therapy. Have a conversation. Talk to your parents. You'll start to figure out a lot of your ways come from them and your grandparents; It's just passed down, it's just what it is. We are animals and we learn from seeing things, just like animals do in nature—no different. So, we need to learn who we are, learn our history, so, if it's a history... that we don't like, we don't repeat it; If it's a history that we can adore, we learn how to take from that history and build upon it. And that's what I'm doing in my own legacy, my own history, is I learned what my family has done, and I'm just building upon that, right? And so, now nobody, now I have a different drive, I have a different passion. I'm not doing this because I learned it at NC State—I ain't learn shit about environmental justice at NC State. Nothing. It wasn't my field, at all. It was Parks Recreation and Tourism, concentration Sports Management with a minor in Business. That's what I went to undergrad for; I didn't even go to undergrad for this work, right? But it's my passion that fuels what I do today. It was my passion that led me to coach for 13 years, even though it took me away from my family, it took me away from the things that I love; It was a sacrifice I was willing to make because I love basketball. And so, figure out who you are, why you are, what you love, why you do what you do. Go get educated, go get trained. Be intentional about your training. Volunteer. Get some experience. Go back. Give back. Volunteer your expertise. Your—and then, as you're training yourself, be building your own plan and map... for yourself, knowing what your next steps are. Be a visionary of your own life. That's what I will say. Now, how to get involved with Freedom. We have three departments. We have volunteer—we are rolling out our volunteer sheet, where you will actually be able to pick your interest... and you'll be able to volunteer with our organization, in many different ways. We also have internship opportunities. UNC definitely has [an] internship
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		opportunity, and it's a paid internship opportunity, through North Carolina State Employee Credit Union. Now that is a competitive one; We've had quite a few people apply in the past, and they do almost every year, so, it is quite competitive. But we're now open to creating more non-paid internship opportunities... And so, just reach out. And, one thing that I've learned, and I'm still learning for myself, and I tell young people all this all the time, and I think you all did a pretty good job, is that if a person is important, they're not—their time is not gonna be free. They're not, like—and so what you have to do is be consistent. And, the rule of thumb is—I just learned this from one of the folks that I was taking a class with, and I'm just like, 'Ah, well that makes sense'; You have to reach out a minimum of seven times to get a response from most people. And I'm just like, 'Ugh, are you kidding me?' Like I try my best not to be that person, but sometimes, like when I say it has been extremely busy, like, it's been—I have over 700 emails right now, and I check my email every day, every week, and I... go through `em and I still have almost 800. So, I'm just like, 'Okay, now I get why people didn't always respond to me right away.' You know what I mean? <i>[Laughs]</i>. And so, it takes consistency. It does. And you all did that. That's the only way you got me here. And I obligated myself to do this, so I'm just like, 'Alright!' If I obligate myself to something, it's a priority. But otherwise, I still have another student from UNC, I seen it come across and I'm just like, 'Okay, I need to get back to this young lady.' But I didn't commit myself to that, so, I still—it's been a long time and I still haven't had a chance to connect with her. And I feel bad about it, but it's just like, at the same time, I'm one person... And I want to be able to answer e'rybody's interview questions and to give insight and hope and inspiration, but it's like, shit, I need that myself sometimes. I need to be able to breathe, I need to be able to reconnect with the people I just met Thursday that I still haven't connected with, and it's Monday. So, it's just like—and we're in the middle of tax season, guys, like this is... [not] a large organization... We're small, we have to reconcile our own books. Like, I'm just like, 'Oh, gosh!' You know? So, it's just like a lot of things that I think that I
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		didn't understand as a mentee, that now I understand as a mentor. And being consistent, volunteering, showing up and being passionate takes you a very, very long way, in life. I... now start to tell young people... volunteering shows your heart; It shows people where your heart is. You know what I'm saying? I volunteered as a basketball coach, my first year as a collegiate basketball coach. In between me goin' overseas and playing overseas, I volunteered. Somebody asked me, [and] I'm just like, 'Pfft, okay, I'll do it... I love the game, I'm just waiting to go back overseas.' So, I started to volunteer and I fell in love with coaching in a way that I never knew that I would. And, with everything going on with my family, Coach Yow had just passed, it had given me opportunity to still be home with my family and still be around sports. That next year, I got offered a full-time job, because I was there every practice, on time. I was there like I was a full-time staff member, volunteering. Next year, full-time position; That started my 13-year career collegiate opportunity—collegiate coaching career. Same thing, two employees. The two employees that we have under our Chief Agriculture Dir—Chief Agriculture Visionary—is, we have two positions that we hired full-time. One we hired last year, [and] another we just hired this year. One is now a program director we hired this year; The other an agriculture program director—she was our... program director two years ago. She started out as a volunteer. You wanna know where she went to college? Emory University.
1:24:31	R.T.	Hmm.
1:24:31	M.D.	Exactly! You're like, "Ooh, yeah, one of them." She started out volunteering, and... I mean, just so passionate, and she ended up being... my mentee, and I was her mentor. And she just showed up, very, very passionate. But she didn't show up passionate in that way because she was working for FreedomOrg. That was already her mission. So, when I met her as a mentee, she already had what she wanted and why she wanted to do it. Her—she told me her degree, what it was in, what she was looking to do, and I'm just like, "Hm, that aligns wit' a lot that we're

		looking to do here at Freedom; Hey, I have this opportunity for you.” ... And I literally sat down in our meeting and I'm just like, “By the time in the next five years, you'll be CEO.” And she didn' believe me. She still does not believe me. But, in one year she was promoted from Ag Program Director to Ag Director, of the whole department. You feel me sayin’? So, it's... And then the same thing; She found someone, that she's like, “Uh, this person is really passionate; I really love the way that they work, I love their work ethic.” And she's like, “Hey, Q, you really need to meet this person... I think they'd be great for our Ag department.” [I] met her, she volunteered [a] whole year, same work ethic. I'm just like, “Nah, seriously, this is the type of—this is what we need in our organization; Alright, let me see if I can rework this budget, let me see if we can find a grant, to at least start us out” ... Because once you do the grant, you can—you get your wages back. Right, so, I'm just like, “Okay, let me strategize, how can I do—how can we figure this out?” We figured it out; We needed her. And she was able to grow our capacity just like that. So... it's not just showin’ up; It's showin’ up with your purpose, within your purpose and within your passion, and just aligning. And, once you—I'm a very spiritual person; I believe once you align with something, it all falls into place. You do things with good intent for the right reasons, it falls into place. May not be exactly when you want it, but eventually, it falls into place. So, that's my advice to you, as young people, and to any other young people you all spread this news to.
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1:26:40	R.T.	Yeah, that's really inspiring... I'm interested to know... I'm glad I learned about, kinda the... how many people that you have on your team and how fast everyone rose, and that's—it's really a testament to how... dedicated your organization is, so—
1:26:57	M.D.	—Yeah—
1:26:57	R.T.	—that is very good to hear...