Interviewee: Marcus McDonald

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Interviewer: Shuhud Mustafa, Historic Charleston Foundation

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Transcriber: Transcribe Me, Inc

BEGIN INTERVIEW

SHUHUD MUSTAFA:	This is Shuhud Mustafa, and I am interviewing Marcus McDonald on Tuesday, July 6th, 2021, at the St. Julian Devine Center. Can you say and spell your full name?
MARCUS MCDONALD:	Marcus, M-A-R-C-U-S, McDonald, M-C-D-O-N-A-L-D.
SM:	Where were you born and raised?
MM:	I was born and raised in Columbia, South Carolina, originally, on Oak Street. Actually, I lie. I was born in Maryland, Silver Springs. But I moved away from there when I was a couple months old, so I don't have that much memory of it. But yeah, I grew up and was raised Columbia, on Oak Street, in the Five Point/Waverly area.
SM:	Can you tell us about your family?
MM:	Yeah, sure. So both my parents are deaf, or hard-of-hearing. So mom's halfway deaf, and my dad's fully deaf. So I feel like that's influenced the way how I am. And they're the only deaf people in their family, so they're kind of like the black sheeps in their family. So as a child of them, I kind of had to find my own. But yeah, my family's nice on both sides. My dad and my mom are both in my life. Dad's side's more from Sumnter. A rural area. But my great-great-great grandma actually [inaudible] to Boone Hall Plantation, where she was enslaved, and unfortunately impregnated by the slavemaster [inaudible]. But regardless, that's where my family history comes from. All of it stems from Charleston. And on my mom's side as well, more downtown Charleston. Yeah. So that's my family. And then I got an older brother, a younger brother, and two younger sisters.
SM:	And where does your immediate family stay right now?
MM:	Immediate family stays in Columbia. And I got some aunties who live out here in Charleston with me.
SM:	And where did you go to school?
MM:	I went to school at AC Flora High School. And then I went to College of Charleston for higher education. I went to school for finance.
SM:	And what sorts of classes did you take?
MM:	So I mean, high school, I guess, we just took normal classes. I was in advanced classes. So I was interested in that. And also really advanced in math and stuff. And then moving forward to college, I was actually originally a political science major. So I wanted to do that originally, and my mom was like, "You

need to do something that makes you money." So I changed my major to finance and still enjoyed it. Obviously a totally different career path. But they do intertwine a lot. If you see a lot of these politicians talk, they always talk about money. "Where are we getting the money from?" So that's the classes that I taught. I'm glad I took them because they're applicable in a lot of different things.

SM: And you mentioned both of your parents are deaf, or hard-of-hearing, and you mentioned that that has influenced you. How would you say that influenced you?

MM: Well, I verbalized it really recently on my Father's Day post. But I think my granddad really taught me how to speak, because he was the closest person who was speaking in my family. He was always real well-spoken; he is a minister. And like I said, both of my parents are quiet, obviously, because they're deaf. But it's shaped me because it taught me you don't always have to speak to be impactful. Learning how to use your nonverbal communication, I guess, would be the best words. They live on that because that's all they can use. So I've seen my dad flirt with girls at my 16th birthday party, who can hear now, and be talking with them and having a great time. I'm like, "He can't hear anything you're saying." But still, just having that presence is something that both my dad and my mom just showed me, if you have a presence and you have your body language and all that different type of stuff, that matters. And my mom will go whole conversations without saying anything. But I'll translate her, or talk to her, and she'll have thoughts about it but just won't say anything until it's absolutely necessary. She speaks on something. So I think that's one of the most ways. I don't speak on everything at first. I let other people talk and let other people say what they needed to say. And then after I've collected what people are thinking, then I'll say what I need to say, or if there's something that I need to input. So that's how I think it's taught me to be a good listener and a good [value?] of silence.

SM: What was growing up like for you?

MM: It was tough. I mean, so growing up with a mom who had disabilities, it was always hard for her to find a job. She worked at Hardees, a lot of different fast food joints. Worked with my granddad, which was probably the best times as far as pay wise, because then my granddad had a restaurant and a catering service. So he would always just, one, pay them really well. And then once he went out of business, she had to bop around and do different things. And it also was around the time when I was in high school. So my granddad shut down his business, because he had a restaurant and a catering service. Closed both of those down. And then I was in high school. And mind you there's a saying in the black community as far as, "Jump off the porch," and that's when you, as a man - or even as a woman - just get away from your family as much, and you start going out with friends, and going out, and doing your thing. So I jumped off the porch early age, around 15, 16. But I started hanging out. And I did get in some crowds I wish I didn't get into. And I got into some different things. And another part - and this goes back to my family history - the person I was named after, Marcus, he's actually in prison, serving a lifetime sentence, for a shooting that happened when he was, like, 17. So they named me after him. And once I started getting into trouble, they were like, "Oh, we don't want to have you end up like Marcus," or, "We want the best for you obviously." I'm glad they did. But I'd say I grew up. It was tough, especially around Five Points area. They call it the Oneside. But that and the area, GGP, which is the

neighborhood next to me, I remember I could see it walking from my house because it was on a hillside. We were on a hill, and we could see GGP from this side.

But there was a lot of people who hated me. They'd threaten my life and whatnot. And I remember thinking, looking over there-- so I had competition around that whole neighborhood. Mind you, I went to school with them too. So it was just tough dealing with that. People who I used to grow up with now, they hate me, want to fight me and stuff. So it was tough growing up. But I had always been the kid who was always in my books too. Fun fact about me, I used to bring the Bible to school. Even though I don't practice Christianity now, I used to just bring the Bible to school because I was interested in learning and learning more things. And that's always been my thing. So even when I was getting into trouble, even my OGs, people who had been in this for a long time, they're like, "You are smart, dude. You don't have to be in-- you know what I mean? You have a future." And even people my age, and even older than me, was like, "You have a future, dog. Go out and do it. One of us has to make it out of the hood." So long story short, that was my upbringing, just being in the mix, being with my friends, but also just being that one smart guy. I was like, "All right. Maybe we shouldn't do this," or, "Maybe we should do this a different way," type of thing. So that's always been my MO.

SM: Can you describe the neighborhood you grew up in?

MM: Yeah. So it was low-to-middle-class. So we had some middle-class black folks that lived there. But there was definitely a lot of poverty, especially that I experienced personally. So like I said, there was a lot of middle-class black folks, but there was a lot of people who were going down bad. Especially the public housing complex that I mentioned, Gonzales Gardens, that was probably four or five blocks away from me. But extreme poverty there. And there was a lot of violence going on there too. So I think about it, too, they tore down a project apartment now. But before, I kid you not, about from age 14 to 18, I probably heard about at least eight killings that I knew about - I knew them or I knew of what was going on - within, like, a four-year span. And that's crazy. When I was in high school, I would just be like, "If I stay here, I could be one of those bodies." Thinking like that. Oh, and the neighborhood I was talking about, like I said, with all those bodies, it was also on gangland too. So everybody who was there was Bloods. I don't know how to say it. I would say it definitely was a hectic growing up environment. A lot of those people who I grew up with, we'd play basketball and stuff growing up. And then once we hit the age 14, 15, everything changed, and people started picking their neighborhoods, picking who they wanted to rock with, who not they want to rock with. And like I said, those lines just got cut around that age. And it was tough for me. But I did a lot of stuff in school that I feel like helped put me in different places. I did youth and government. I started the creative writing club. I ran for treasurer like three times but never got it.

So I just did a lot of different things to just keep me active in school. And I think that helped me get out of the situation I was and decide to move to Charleston and get my grades up. Because there was a time where I was skipping class a lot and not really-- my mom was afraid I wasn't even going to be able to graduate. So they didn't even think I was going to be able to graduate high school. So to see me graduate high school and also graduate college-- and obviously I knew I could graduate high school. Some of the classes were just stupid. I was in AP classes as well. But I still have to say I'd always kept myself

in different little circles, and I've always been good at wearing different hats, being [inaudible] a certain hat, [inaudible] government-wearing hat. Obviously, Democrats as well. So just a lot of me trying to stay-- I was also in band too. So I loved doing jazz band. I loved being in that little realm. I felt like that was one of my safer spaces. So much be going on outside, but I go into that band room, and I just-- we started jazz band class, my senior year or junior year. So I remember [inaudible] we'd just go in there, we'd improvise a little bit, watch a jazz movie, and just chill. Lights were off. It was just a vibe. So I remember just certain parts of that from my childhood that I remember [inaudible], and really glad I had them.

SM: And you mentioned that you moved to Charleston. Around what time was that, and why did you move to Charleston?

MM: So that was when I graduated. So it was wild because Charleston was blowing up, and I kind of lowkey wish I moved a little bit earlier, like maybe a year early, but obviously I was still in school. But I moved after graduation. So I graduated high school in 2015 and then started attending college that following fall. So yeah, just around that time. So around what was happening, Mother Manual happened that summer. And I think Walter Scott happened either-- I don't know. I think it happened earlier that year. And yeah. It was the culmination of all of that black death and black violence was what I was walking into, and I was like, "I don't know." I didn't have any friends. It was definitely a switch, because I was in the hood a lot before. So it was a switch from-- and obviously, I'd say I had white friends and I'd say I had other people who were well-off. But I was nervous, for sure, going in, like, "Am I going to fit in?" da da da. And I ended up finding friends who I call my brothers. But I'd say - yeah - I moved 2015. Been here ever since.

SM: Can you talk a little bit more about your college experiences, specifically as a black man?

MM: Yeah, sure. So it was weird fitting in. I remember the first time it really hit me, like, "Damn--" yeah, I can curse, right? Can I curse?

SM: Yeah.

MM: Yeah. Okay. Well, anyways, but I was like, "Yeah, damn." The first time I really noticed it was-- I mean, obviously I didn't notice it. I mean, I'm always going to be a black man. But the one time it really hit me was-- I don't even think school had started yet. This was one of the rush parties that they do for frats, to get people to join in or whatever. But anyways, so we go to this frat party, there's jungle juice. There was a lot of dudes, I remember. I was like, "I'm not really rocking with this." So we were chilling, drinking, having a good time. Not even drinking and having a good time. I get a drink, and I catch their vibe. I'm like, "Niggas are looking at us weird." And I don't even think nobody said nothing, but just the way they was looking at me, I was like, "I need to leave." So I di. My white friend who was with me, he called me up. He was like, "Where are you going? We chilling, having a good time." I was like, "I just didn't get the good vibes." But that's what happened to me at a lot of different parties. And then I'd see them point me out if I went to a party that was a white frat party, and be like, "Yo, are you with us?" da da da. But if it was one of my white friends who walked in, they'd barely checked them. Because one, I would definitely stand out because I'm one of the only black people at the party. But two, it was like, "Bro, tell all of us to leave. You know what I mean? Just be equitable." So I was like, "Fuck all that. I'm not joining your frat." There was a

couple homies in some of the white frats who I'll still call my brothers today. I literally hit them up about last week. So I did have some older homies who I looked up, white and black, who just were the homies. And I guess I had to get that myself. But I didn't join a frat. I joined Outdoors Club or Editing Club. I just made my own little lane. And it was tough too.

Here's another thing. So they were really bad about drug use and alcohol and stuff. And it felt, to me, that I had a target on my back, because I had smoked, allegedly, a few times. And they caught up with us, and they had weird rules, like, if you were even in the vicinity of somebody who was smoking or drinking, you could get caught, and whatever, and it'd get put on your school record. So I probably got in trouble like three or four times. And it was my fourth time. And they had already moved me from a dorm, which is actually good because I was in an all-dudes dorm. Moved to the co-ed dorm, so I was like, "All right. Bet." But yeah, like I said, I did feel like a target was on my back for a long time, especially from the school. And I remember the last talk we had with the dude, I always remember it because I always think, "Alternate universe, if I had took this dude's advice, my whole reality would be changed, and reality of Charleston, I feel like. But he was talking to me. He was like, "Man, this is your fourth time getting in trouble. You sure Charleston's the place for you? Maybe you need to move away." And I actually thought about it, but I was like, "Man, fuck all that. I'm going to stay." Because one, my family's out here, and I was like, "I'm going to stay," because it was like, "No, fuck all that. I've been doing this. I don't know where the fuck else to go. If I go back to Columbia, I will get in some bullshit." Literally - sad story - every time I go to Columbia, some shit happens. Last couple times I went there, I was in a parking spot and somebody pulled a gun out at me for being in front of their house. I was like, "It's just a parking spot." But anyways, I'd say, though, college experience was good. It was mixed. It was mixed, for sure. Target on my back. I did falter academically sometimes because sometimes my math wasn't on point. Sometimes it was hard to stay focused. And a lot of other options too.

And I just feel like after, too-- I was a finance major, so I knew there was a lot of kids there whose dads did finance, and their dad made a lot of money already. So it was like whatever they did, it didn't really matter because they'd know they was going to get a job after. Or their dad had that shit, and they were trying to get out on their own to not seem like they were doing it, but still, they were probably going to do it as a backup. But regardless, that was not my background. I don't have anybody in finance in my direct family at all. I have some people in science stuff. But yeah, nobody in finance. So I just had to work my ass off. And still that wasn't enough. I got a pretty shitty job after-- it was all right job. But regardless, that was my college experience. It was mixed. But I definitely got through it with the helps of my friends and just folks around me.

SM: You mentioned earlier that you were originally a political science major and decided to switch to finance. What led you to that decision?

MM: Well, it was just my mom. I knew either way that I'd want to get into political activism. I didn't know it was going to be with the Black Lives Matter movement. I didn't know what movement it was going to be with. But I didn't know. I just wanted to be involved in some way, and help people, and fight for something I believe in.

SM: And now that you're mentioning Black Lives Matter, what sort of work do you do for that organization? What's your role?

MM: Well, I'm the lead organizer. And as far as the organization goes-- and I'm not sure if you're totally familiar with it. But it's a decentralized organization. So you have the national organization that does sponsor and-- 'associate with' might not be the right word, but they do a lot of work with the [inaudible]. So the BLM Chicago, BLM LA, BLM, I think, Louisville. So some of the bigger cities, they have BLMs, and they're associated with the national chapter. There's smaller ones, and even in big cities. Atlanta has one. Upstate New York has one. Philly has one. They're not associated with the national organization. And that could stand for two reasons. Either, one, the national chapter does a lot of stuff to make it hard to get in. You have to be a nonprofit. You have to check a lot of boxes. And they pretty much make it really difficult. And they stopped doing it for a long time. They stopped accepting new chapters. And also you have to really fall exactly in line what they believe in, and some people just don't. They're not [inaudible]. There's this whole BLM tent thing, where people, they thought that the individual chapters should get more money and the national chapters are getting too much. I don't know. We as a organization stayed out of it. But I say, we're an independent chapter. So we don't really have that many connections with the national organization at all. We connect through them - what's the word? - I guess through their grapevine. Just the closest word. But with the state chapter, the state chapter does work with them. But as far as the organization, it just be me and the team I got. And I don't know if I messed it up. But it's just the team that we got. We do what we need to do.

But as far as work we do, it definitely feels like less what I do for the organization. It's like what needs to be done for the community. And that might sound corny or whatever. But we really don't have that lead from the organization, like a higher power. I'll put something forth to the group, and be like, "This is what's going on." And we'll usually just bring it up in the meeting. And I'll do it, just like, "All right. This is what's happening. This is what I'm thinking. What do y'all think?" and try to just get input on how we can fix the solutions. But I, as their leader, try to keep my ears to the ground, like, "All right. What are the issues?" So once we come up with a plan, we know we're not just doing some bullshit and nobody really is going to help. We try to make sure it's something that's feasible and that somebody's actually asking for help with. So to answer your question, though, as far as the main work we do, actually, towards legislation, abolition legislation in particular in regards to law enforcement and the penal system. So we stray away from some of the traditional forms. Like community policing, we're really against that because what it really does it take money from the communities and put it into a cop advertising scheme. That's bullshit in my opinion. So we fight a lot against that. We just had a big battle. We're still fighting with [inaudible]. They call their police substation a 'gathering center', which is real problematic because the original cops here were slave catchers. So a slave catcher, slave gatherers. Gathering center seems sketchy to me. But in a black neighborhood that's getting mad gentrified-- and gentrification is a huge-- and I'm not going to get too deep into this because I'll go on a rant. But gentrification and cop brutality, they go hand in hand, because what they'll do is, they'll be like, "All right. We want to make this area go up and whatever, whatever." So increase the cop presence so much that people just don't want to live there.

For example, even with the Breonna Taylor case, that area was trying to get gentrified out, and that shit happened. And that's not to say that person did that thing exactly because of gentrification, but then it linked. As a law enforcement

person, you accept orders from the city, or the state, and you withdraw your moral compass on this shit. So that's a whole other thing on why we are so anti-police. Our tenant is the abolition of law enforcement and the penal system. So we do work around that and how we can gradually abolish the system. And I use 'gradually' loosely. We're making active steps. We want this and this to happen at certain dates and times. But it's a marathon, not a sprint, regardless. So that's one side of the things we do. A lot of economic [impairment?] stuff. So we do financial literacy centers. If they're looking for employment, we usually try to help with flight reservations and stuff. People ask us all the time, like, "I need help with this. Do you have any--?" A lot of employers are asking us, "We need X, Y, and Z. Somebody who's looking for a job. Black employees especially." And we usually hook it up. We had a girl here who actually did some art in one of our art shows. And some lady who's a artist was like, "Yo, I need an art whatchamacallit." And mind you, the girl, she was only like 16, 17. And I sent the artist her way. I was like, "Boom, boom, boom. Connected," and she was like, "Oh, I'm actually looking for somebody a little bit older." She waited for a little bit. She was like, "Actually, that might work." And like I said, that's a part-time job for her now while she's in school. So just trying to make connections like that. We've been real in-tune with affordable housing. So stuff in that lane.

Reparations. We're super passionate about reparations for black folk for slavery. And Jim Crow and everything leading up to that. Also, another thing we are passionate about is education. So we have our ECDC Center that we work with pretty closely [inaudible]. We do batch school drives. Actually, in regards to education at school, CCSD is about to get millions of dollars for funding. And we're really pressuring them to put some of that money into community centers, because a lot of the times, the kids might not want to go to a program or to school, but they'll go to a down-the-street community center. And we started one even for our learning pod. We had a learning pod for almost a whole school year last year. And what is was is, pretty much, kids just went to the community center, which they would do all their online classes and get tutoring. And we had extracurricular activities and lunch for them. And that was all throughout the school year. So I don't know. That was just one of our big-- I felt really proud about it because it was something that we literally had to-- we came up with the idea before the school system was even saying that they would be doing or giving funds for it. So we already had the place renovated, and had computers, all that, before school even started. And then once it started, we were just ready to go. We had a couple of batch school drives. Had everybody materialed up and ready to learn. So that's just something we're real passionate about. Also, on the curriculum, with this whole CRT fight-- even though CRT, critical race theory, isn't even in schools. But working on changing the curriculum to better represent our people is something that we've been really passionate about. And I actually have to follow up with somebody on it soon. But just things of that nature. So it's a wide range. People like to put us in a box of like, "Oh, they're just protesting and defund the police," when it's so much more than that.

Our mission statement is, "We're advocating for programs and legislation that empower the black community by any means necessary." So that's what we stand by. So we try to do any type of programs or legislation that looks and sounds like it could benefit our people, especially in Charleston. We try to jump at it.

SM: Can you talk about when and how you got involved with BLM in Charleston?

MM: Yeah. So I guess a good way to introduce that is there's an old BLM chapter here. To kind of give you more information about the shoes I was stepping in, so the old chapter-- like I was saying earlier, Walter Scott happened here, and a lot of other black deaths. And especially with the Emanuel Nine as well. And my great-grandma was actually the oldest member of that church. She died at 102. But what was I about to say? So there was a chapter before. It was led by Muhiyidin d'Baha. He was the lead organizer. Did a lot of great movement work. Protested real heavy for Walter Scott. Ended up getting Michael Slager convicted, who was one of the only-- I think there's like five cops who have been convicted of murder - you know what I mean? - in the United States in history. Another one's Derek Chauvin. But that's so rare. So I commend him so much for doing that work. He was a real big community member. So he did food drives, school drives, all that. Similar to what we do today. He had this overarching program. But regardless, so 2015 was real big. Had the BLM chapter going. I guess in the following years the movement shifted. He was going through financial trouble. I think he was going through bouts of homelessness. Just really going through it. And I don't know what happened. But oh yeah, this is what put the nail in the coffin for me. The old chapter, I believe-- I mean, I'm going to be quoted on everything. But I think, and I'm 90% sure, because this is what I've been told by other members, but there is a real big split on, "Are we pro-homosexuality? Are we pro-LGBT?"

And we just, not in our group-- because shoot, I want to say like 40% of our group identifies LGBT. Yeah. So what was I about to say? Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. So there was a big fallout between that. The whole BLM chapter kind of imploded. And Muhiyidin moved out to New Orleans because he was just trying to start a movement out there and getting things going. And so he moved out there. He was out there for like six months, seven months. And we don't know what happened. Apparently it was false identification. But somebody shot him, and he was killed out in New Orleans in like 2017, I think. So those were the shoes I was stepping into. So obviously big feet to fill. And he was real well-known. He was also real well-known from video. He yanked this Confederate flag out of somebody's hand and ran off with it. And that was when they were taking the Confederate flag down, too. So real instrumental in all that. But yeah. So I started out George Floyd protests. So even before the big protests, actually, I knew I they was going to be on track. But when I got there, I was like, "The BLM chapter should be speaking right now," because the video went everywhere. And you could tell, before the video dropped-- when it dropped, you could tell it was everywhere. So I was like, "I need to do something." So I was like, "I know how to make Instagram. I'm pretty good with it." I saw something on their Facebook. Didn't really see them posting anything. So I was like, "All right. Boom. We starting it up." So I just started the Instagram account. And then I was an unofficial chapter. I was just trying to get the word out, spread information about protests happening here. So that's how I started out, just getting people worried about protests and what was going on. So started it out. Just giving people more information about the protests we had. There was big one on Saturday, and there was a big one on Sunday.

Both of them got real hectic for different reasons. But that's how I got started, just going, showing up. I had the Instagram account. So I'd just record, and be like, "This is what's going on. Show up." And yeah. It gained traction. I think, in our first two or three weeks, we were already at like - what? - 5,000

followers, which isn't that much. But for starting out, I was like, "All right. Boom." We had it started up. Obviously the protests died down. And our original group was thick. It was like 30, 40 people. And there was a lot of people who obviously fell out, did their own thing. And then it hits a tipping point, when they were like, "All right--" because I didn't even introduce myself to the leader. I was just like, "I'm just a part of this. I run the Instagram account." But I started taking more leadership positions, and nobody was saying anything, so I was like, "Somebody has to keep shit going." And I was like, "All right. Bet." So I think it was maybe like two or three weeks in, and I was speaking at an event, and somebody introduced me as the president. And people were like, "Oh, he's not the president," da da da, "We coming in to vote with that." So I said, "All right. Vote." I thought I had a good chance. I was like, "People rock with me," da da da. I find out I probably got like-- so the poll in itself, in my opinion, was rigged because it wasn't me versus other candidates. It was me, no president, or somebody else's president. Somebody else's president got the lowest one. I got second-lowest, and then somebody else was overarching one. So I think, out of like 40 people, I probably got like 9 of the vote. Like 25%, 30%. Something like that. And I was like, "Damn. I got a lot of work to do."

So from then on there, I just put a shit ton of work in. Organizing a batch school drive, organize a whole bunch of shit, and just kept at it. And then a month or two after that vote, I don't think-- we had it officially, like, "Yeah, you're the leader," but I had to work my ass off to get to that point. You know what I mean? It wasn't just like, "You're the leader now. We do what you say." And even when I became the leader, people tried to call me a couple of times just on bullshit, obviously. But yeah. It was a process. But yeah. After about two or three months, I became the leader. I've just been doing it ever since. Just staying on point and making sure everybody's voice is heard but it's the right voice.

SM: As a BLM organizer, are there any other organizations you collaborate with currently? If so, can you tell me more about that?

MM: Oh, yeah, tons. So first one, ECDC. I'll tell you about our relationship. Man. I did not know what, where BLM chapter-- I don't know if we'd even exist the way we do if we hadn't have found ECDC because-- and they reached out to me too. And I remember our first meeting, actually, because it was over Zoom. But I remember it vividly because I remember everything that was going on. This was like mid-June, and everything was going on. And this is what happened, too. It was a relationship born out of trauma. So apparently, after the Sunday protest, where they were arresting everybody-- mind you, that was one of the most hectic days of my life. And I remember I played this game, that week even, where I'd hold my breath and if-- I could hold my breath until I get a notification. That's how many notifications I would get. And I remember one time I did it. It was past midnight, and I was still just getting notifications every 5 seconds, 10 seconds. And it was fucking crazy. And it did a lot on my mental health and my stress. And I'm glad I took-- I wasn't even really able to take a break. I got Coronavirus, and my whole shit-- you know how it fogs up your memory? I was like, "I really just can't do shit right now." You know what I mean? But I say all that to say-- so yeah, ECDC. Apparently, after that Sunday protest, a whole bunch of cops came in and on the east side, like right there, pretty much, and started teargas and pepper bullets. Shooting it at just east side residents who were sitting on the porch. So the east side community, I was like, "What the fuck's going on?" So they called the chief, because before then, they

had a good relationship. I was like, "Chief, what the fuck going on?" And the chief was like, "Well, there was a trash can on fire," and the [inaudible] was like, "That don't have shit with you tear gassing folks," and he was like, "Well, y'all do know y'all have a bad drug problem," verbatim, from the chief of police. And I think, since then, he has still not gotten that respect back from her. Because to blame a community's drug problem-- not like those people on King Street don't be doing drugs every damn night. But to blame a community's drug problem on the reason why you're brutalizing them is so abhorrent.

So anyways, they reached out to me, and was like, "All right. Chief is on some bullshit, so we're going to have to talk to you." So they chat it up with me. They were like, "We rocked with the movement." I helped them out with the rally that they had on the east side about it. And we just connected real tight. I helped renovate their whole place. I don't know if y'all seen it before, or y'all haven't seen it before, but before, it was a totally different space. We redid the flooring, the walls, the painting. That bar wasn't there, with the computers. That wasn't there yet. They put that on. Laptops, all that. So they really transformed my relationship. And like I said, that's our homebase, pretty much. So that relationship was really dope. LAC, they do a lot of work. They're probably the most similar to us in Charleston, the Lowcountry Action Committee. And honestly, full disclosure, it wasn't the best relationship. And I don't know if we're going to get into it, but there was a lot coming in. There was a lot of black organizations that didn't rock with me. And still to this day there's some people who just not totally with it. And I remember the first one-- and I'm not going to go on a smear campaign, because obviously the ones who I'm about to talk to, we're cool right now. I'll hit them up anytime. But [inaudible] Charleston Activist Network, who, like I said before, we're cool now, but was at my neck when I was first coming in. So it was a lot of, like, "Damn," trying to figure out relationship building, because not everybody's going to like you, but you have to make them respect you. And that's what I feel like I did from my dedication. And people seeing that, they're like, "Oh yeah, this isn't just some clout chaser or whatever, whatever." So Charleston Activist Network. We're cool now. I think it's just her; it's not an organization. But we're cool. Our relationship's good. We do a lot of advocacy work. Lowcountry Action Committee, like I said, they help us out on the east side a lot. We're actually doing a summer camp together. So we do a lot of that.

And they have a lot more backing than I'll ever have, because they have Avery Research Center. So they get support from the college and whoever supports them. Versus us, it's kind of just us. So they help in the way they can. But yeah. Those are some of the organizations that I'm closest with that we do a lot of work with.

SM: And outside of the ECDC and the LAC that you mentioned, are there any other organizations you work with closely?

MM: Yeah. So let me think. I'm trying to think of any other-- I mean, there's tons. I'm trying to figure out the best ones. But I work with a lot of different folks. We have People's Army and Black Lives militia. They do a lot of our whatchamacallit work, like marshalling work for protests. So that's always important, just scattering out the perimeter. We do work with ACLU a lot. They've given us credence on a lot of stuff because they're a national organization. So they've helped us out with research and different stuff like that. So we try to stay connected with them and do as much work as we can. CAJM, also. I can't forget them. They're Charleston Area Justice Ministry. And they've

been doing a lot of work since Muhiyidin passed away, actually. But they were real instrumental in getting the racial bias out of north Charleston and the city of Charleston. Treva, who runs it, me and her talk all the time. Jerry, who's in it, me and him-- he's actually my mentor. He runs the American Society for Literature and African American History. But I consider him a mentor to me. We're always chatting it up, working on different things. So yeah, no, both of those organizations. ACLU, and People's Army, and all those folks do a lot of good work. I'm trying to think of anybody else. But also businesses too. Businesses help us out. Xiao Bao has been a real good ally. Dellz, which is a black-owned vegan restaurant, they've been hitting us up a lot, supporting. Sightsee Coffee Shop, one of the OG-- Sightsee Coffee Shop and Xiao Bao Biscuit are some of the OG supporters, because even when it was unpopular to-- I mean, I guess I wouldn't say all that. But even times when it was unpopular, and it was more popular to just take the, "We're just a business. We're not in the politics wrap," they were like, "No, fuck all that. We're going to be in the political wrap."

Shoot, Sightsee said, "Defund and abolish the police." Xiao Bao hasn't gone now. But they've gone to defund, and they're like, "Why is all of our funds going to this?" So they've used their platforms well. So you need organizations like that that have a platform. They're not just activist people [inaudible]. They're people who just might want to drink a coffee, or eat a meal, and just like, "Oh, I'm going to learn some shit today, too." So all those folks. Oh, Destiny's Community Cafe. She hooks me up with all the food. So I got a lot of different food connections, people hooking it up, so.

SM: Can you talk more about what the protest on Sunday were about and your reaction to them?

MM: Yeah, sure. So on Sunday, the protest was still about George Floyd, but it was also about all victims of police violence. And we made that clear in our speeches and what we said. We were just like, "George Floyd is a flashpoint incidence, but we've seen things like that happen even with the Emanuel Nine and the Walter Scott case." And we really tried to make it about connecting all of that and being united. And honestly, it was tough. We weren't even able to get a lot of our messaging out because we just got brutalized real quick. It was like, Saturday, we were able to have speakers, and talk, and do different things. And that was where the uprising happened on Saturday. But the Sunday, like I said, it was us just being there and trying to move correct. And obviously, as far as BLM, we weren't involved, and me personally. Wasn't involved, for the record, even though a lot of Republican politicians will think otherwise. But regardless. So yeah. So Sunday was about unity, connecting. We were out there in force, I remember. And like I said, I think it really popped off when we were trying to take seven minutes for George Floyd. And they started shooting at us. Many of us, while we were laying down, just shooting at us with their pepper bullets or whatever. I got shot a couple times. My homegirl, my ex-girlfriend, actually, got shot in her face. Was really bruised up. Had a bruised eye. And she was with us. She's been steady throughout a lot of stuff. But regardless, yeah, they brutalized us then. And it's never been the same.

And they've gotten more money to do that exact same thing, like over a million dollars, to brutalize folks who are trying to just use their First Amendment right. So yeah, it's a whole bunch of BS. But I would say, yeah, that was what it was about, just uplifting everybody. Still showing folks that, even though there was a violent protest the night before, we could do it nonviolently. And a lot of

the stuff we've learned since then, actually. We learned a lot of the folks who came and did the rioting. There were many of the folks who weren't even at the original protest on Saturday. So it was a real slap in the face to a lot of us because it was like, "You don't even really care about this shit, but you'll loot a store," you know what I mean? Versus somebody I get who might be mad and might break a car or some shit like that. That's different. Like I said, all forms of resistance, we accept. But at the same time, there's-- especially if you're white, and you're doing all that crazy shit, sit your ass down, in my opinion, because there were some white folks-- like I said, this one white girl, who I knew beforehand, she didn't even give a fuck about black people or black lives, but was just daydrinking before and then literally looted over 10 bands from this store. 10 bands, like $10,000. And I was like, "You don't even--" so there was a lot of frustration, to say the least. Just hearing that and being tied so closely-- and this is another thing. For example, there's a old civil rights leader who's been here forever. Well-respected. I don't even want to say his name because I don't want her to come at me. But I was even talking to her recently now. All the stuff we do is public, so people know how much we're in the community and stuff.

But she was on the phone with me, like, "All right. I rock with everything y'all do, but you know what? I can't do the looting." People think we stand on the corner, and that's what we're-- "Let's go. Loot." That's not what we preach. And even though we are about resistance by any means necessary, people think that's literally all we do. And they put us in a box. And we've had to escape that box. But at the end of the day, we can only do the work that we do already. And if people accept it, cool. If not, fuck it.

SM: And how long have you been living and working in the Eastside?

MM: I actually live on Line Street, so I live close to the west side. But I've been working here pretty much since that incident. Pretty much since last summer. Yeah, so. But a couple of my homegirls used to live out here, so I actually be out here a lot. But I didn't do a lot of work, work here until I got involved in the BLM chapter.

SM: And have you noticed any changes since you've moved around the Eastside?

MM: As far as what? As far as changes of how the neighborhood looks, or--?

SM: How the neighborhood looks, police presence, anything of the sort.

MM: Yeah. So I mean, in the last year, since I've been here, it got a lot more gentrified. A lot of people are getting kicked out of their houses, especially with the pandemic. It hit a lot of people hard. So I noticed that. I don't know. As far as police presence, I've seen it definitely increase and get crazy at times. I've also been to vigils where-- for example, there's a vigil. I think his name's Robert Jenkins. But he was killed in a drive-by shooting. And he was a young guy. A lot of my students actually knew him, because I teach at Burke High School. But a lot of my students knew him, and they were out there. And I spoke. I said a couple things. But the flashpoint to me was that, during the shooting, there was a cop like a block away that drove off. Didn't do anything to stop the situation or nothing. He just dipped. And the whole community saw it. There was literally a cop on duty right there. So it was one of those slaps in the face because any time we say, "Defund the police," or, "Devest from the police," they'd be like, "Oh, well, what about the crime?" And it's like, "Y'all were there at the crime, and y'all still ain't do shit." So it was like, "Why do we need you

here for, and why do we keep putting money into this, and community policing, and all this, if y'all aren't going to do shit when people are literally getting shot in the streets?" So yeah. I mean, for that and a myriad of reasons, that's just one of the different things we've seen here as far as east side and police presence. Something I've noticed too more - and this is something I rock with - is just people are getting more familiar with me. So that's a good thing. That's not one of the description of the east side. But people just saying what's up. And a lot of stuff, I won't do it on the record, or I won't do it under the BLM name. I'll just do it and just be out.

I pass out food maybe once or twice a month. We'll have a food drive. Or somebody will be like, "Oh, we got this food we need to get off." I'll just go to Martin Park, Mall Park, and just pass out food. So I've noticed people are just like, "Oh yeah, you're that kid," or, "Oh, I saw you on the news. Yeah. Okay." So I just see people. And especially something young. People don't see that. People don't see young black men do shit like that and be out there like that. You know what I mean? So to see somebody doing it in Charleston, and just be on the Eastside that much, I feel like some of the old heads really respect me. And I don't want to speak too highly of myself, but I just think they really respect what I'm doing. And they let me know. They're just like, "I rock with you, bro. You're a real one." And I appreciate that love, because I could give a fuck what Post and Courier, these other white organizations care. But if I get that support and love from people in my community, that's all that matters to me, so.

SM: As a young leader in this community, how would you say the youth should be engaged in the future?

MM: [inaudible] a tough one because I feel like the youth are as engaged if it's something that they give a fuck about. But at the same time, we could be more engaged. And I feel like especially just black youth is so hard because you're going through so much shit with your identity, family situations. And a lot of times, black teens and black young adults, I feel like they have trouble because they're dealing with so much shit, and they know that there's issues, but it's like, "Is my voice even going to affect it?" And I feel like sometimes we feel silenced. And how a lot of people, and black people especially, people of color, just in general, will feel like a lot of the political realm is white spaces. And they're just like, "Oh, I don't talk like that," or, "I don't have the background. I'm not welcomed into these white spaces." And I've been real adament and being like, "Yo, fuck that. If you have a voice, and your voice is-- regardless of how you speak or if you get nervous, say what the fuck you got to say because if you don't say nothing, they're not going to believe that there's issues. So say some shit," because I know there's issues, and you can't tell me there's not because I've seen them. So I was just like, "Say what's on your mind." "Say what you need to say and get it off your chest," is what I say. But I think, in regards to how they should, I feel like it just depends on the times. I think my kids will be still fighting similar fights that I fight unfortunately. But it is what it is. White supremacy is strong. But [inaudible]. And I think in the ways that you engage, it's up to them. I mean, I think young folks can be more engaged, for sure. But politics is an old white man game. And they have all the money, and they have all the resources and connections. So sometimes it just feels like you're just a uphill battle. But I think they should just get involved any way they can. I don't want to tell them what way, but you just got to make sure you do it and make sure it's consistent, because they like to hear somebody duck off.

And also, I mean, just a tip for young folks. I don't know. If you use your voice, make sure it's consistent. And don't let anybody write you off or treat you like a kid, because no matter how old you are, you still have an experience, and that experience is valid. So I mean, I felt-- shit, I was paying bills at like 16 and felt like I was [in the dote?] at 14, like a grown ass man. I was like, "I can move out right now." I was getting money and stuff. So I don't know. I'd say I would say, yeah, I would hope that they stay engaged. But as far as how they do that, I just hope they be continuous with it.

SM: Can you talk more about your teaching role at Burke High School and how that intersects with your work with BLM?

MM: Sure. Well, a lot of times, the-- so pretty much all the teachers know who I am because they see me on TV. The kids, it's half and not half. So some of them will be like, "[inaudible]." Some people are like, "I don't care." But regardless of where they're at in that spectrum, 9 out of 10, all the kids rock with me because one, I think I'm one of the youngest black teachers there. I be getting mistaken for a kid all the time. But yeah, as far as how it intersects, I mean, I think it gives me more credence because I feel like a lot of times, the city officials and folks who try to play me off, or be like, "Oh, this and that issue. We're in the schools. We're in da da da da." But I'm like, "No, I'm at Burke. I'm teaching these kids every day. So I don't talk to them like that." And I'm real protective. Even with my ECDC kids. But it's like, since I'm at Burke, there's certain shit you can't tell me. There's certain shit you can't fool me because I know what the fuck's going on. And something too is, early on, they liked to paint [inaudible] BLM and what we're all about as outsiders, who aren't in the hood like that. And they tried to do that even with the national BLM, like, "Oh, BLM, they don't really help black people like that," da da da. So I had to [inaudible] all that shit and just be like, "In regards of we do stuff in our organization, yes. But you can never tell me about what I do and don't do, because if you don't do shit-- if you're not out here as much as us, then you don't have a pedestal to say this stuff on." You know what I mean? I'll tell people, just like, "Yo, what have you done? And if you want to help us out with this, cool. And you don't sound uplifted. But don't just shoot shots. We continuously do the work."

So to answer your question, though, Burke High School, I think it just gives me a good screenshot, or snapshot, of what a lot of these kids go through because I'm in their lives a lot. And they wear a lot of what they're going through on their shoulders and on their sleeves. And I don't know. Just seeing that, just being there for the kid, because a lot of them, they live downtown. So I'm just hearing their stories. Even with Ronjanee Smith, the young lady who was killed in north Charleston when she was like 14, I believe. Just turned 14. But a lot of my kids were at that party where it got shot up. And just hearing their stories around things like that-- on top of that, even with getting a job, a lot of these kids are going through check stress at 15, 16. I was going through the same shit, so I was like, "I don't front you," because I had a part-time, close to full-time job when I was 15, 16. Even working illegally at some times. But I say that to say just getting that pulse is important. And you get that from the kids, because a lot of times, they're direct products of their environment. And whether that's a good thing or bad thing is to be decided. But I don't know. I feel like it just gives me a good pulse on what's going on.

SM: How would you describe the high school you currently teach at?

MM: I think it's real cool. I mean, it's a Title 1 school, for sure. Predominately black. Historically black. Actually, my granddad and my great-grandma went to Burke. And the last story I remember my great-grandma telling me was like, "Yeah, we went to Burke. We had our book straps." They used to have belts, and that's how they used to carry their books. And I think she said her book bag broke, and he took the belt off of his pants and [inaudible], and then they went to school together. That's my granddad. But regardless, she used to always tell me stories like that. But yeah. So I say all that to say, a historically black high school. I think it's good. I mean, we got a good black teaching staff. I mean, I love it out there. Yeah.

SM: And what grades do you teach?

MM: I teach all the grades. So 9th through 12th. So I've been seeing a little bit of everything.

SM: And what do you teach specifically?

MM: I'm a substitute teacher there. So they just have me in and out of different things. But I like English/Language Arts. It's my favorite one.

SM: Outside of your teaching role, where do you see yourself in 5 to 10 years, and where do you see the Eastside in 5 to 10 years?

MM: So as far as my role in BLM, or--?

SM: Just in general.

MM: So I see myself in five years-- what year is it? 2021. I want to have a house in Charleston. Be paying my mortgage off. I'll probably still have to get loans. Don't want to kid myself. But still want to be working on the east side. I want to be in the East Side Development Cooperation. And they asked me to be a board member recently, so I'll probably be still doing that. I'm hopefully still with the chapter, if we can still get it to grow some more. So we're looking for some pieces to grow. But as far as on me, I want to have my house. I want to hopefully have a restaurant as well, like a little late-night soul food spot, and also do events and stuff. Event space as well. So I want to be doing that. I want to continuously be doing work. Fighting for what I need to fight for. I thought about running for office. Some people really do want me to. So that could be very well a possibility about five years now, because I was thinking, "Shoot, I might run in like two or three years." But I could definitely see myself fight, get elected, be serving on that role. But even if I get elected, I do want to still-- if I haven't found a successor to lead the chapter, I'll still probably, honestly still be involved. Even if I'm not the lead organizer, I'll still be a co-leader, but just as a politician. But I still want it to be boots on the ground. I still want to be out there like that regardless of what position I'm in. I still want to be out there, using my voice.

SM: And where do you see this community in 5 to 10 years?

MM: Eastside?

SM: Yeah.

MM: Shoot. We could go one of two ways. If it goes the way I don't want it to go, I could see this whole place being gentrified out, the black community totally erased in five years, if it goes the rate it's going. But if something's drastically done to stop that, then it could be different. I could see the Eastside Community

Center being better, building it up more. I could see some of the parks getting renovated, getting better. I want them to improve some of the housing conditions, because the housing conditions are inhumane right now. So I just want to see a lot more done. But I think, like I said, there's two options. They could very well wipe out the majority of the black population that lives on the east side if they keep doing what they're doing now. But like I said, on the more positive-- and I think there's some changes on the way that could make things go down. I think there is a new folks that-- we're trying to start the Real Estate Club. There's a lot of different things we're trying to do to stop that from happening. But I mean, I've heard from OGs. They think that's just how it's going to be regardless of what we do. But I mean, we'll see. But if there's improvements on the works, to answer your question, then I could see it still be thriving. I think the gentrification is something that there's just going to have to be a real big tipping point or something, that's going to be like, "All right. This is enough," for it to actually be enough. Or it's just going to be totally different shit. All the old people and people who lived there their whole lives just have to uproot and leave because the price of living is so high up there, and land taxes, and stuff. But I don't know. I could see it going a couple different ways. But I'm hoping for the best.

SM: Is there anything else that you'd like to share that you haven't mentioned already today?

MM: No. I'd say one other thing. I don't think we've mentioned it as far as, I guess, relationships with other people in the community. And not even on the Eastside in general. I know we've been talking about the east side a lot. But just relationships that I've had to build in Charleston. Charleston's so cultured. So I want to say a big part of my story and the way that I am right now is obviously a lot of my own perseverance in what I've been doing. But there's been so many people who have stepped in, and helped out, and laid it all on the line to make sure I was successful and make sure things are good. And there's just too many people to shout out. But I do want to say I am a product of black people lifting me up. And even people tearing me down, I'll use that as ammo sometimes. I take the negative, or sometimes it's actual criticism that's valid. But I just use all that to make myself a better person. So I value my relationships, and I value just continuing the work because the work will continue regardless who's here to fight it. So even after me and after my time, I hope there's people who will continue the fight, regardless of how long I live or how long my activeness in activism is. I just hope there's a continuity. And I think that's what I was saying before, as far as the youth and what I want them to do, is it has to be a continuation and it has to be people continuing this work, because you cannot be destroyed nor created. Oh, I forgot the rest of it. But you know what I mean. So I'm trying to just continue that energy. And I'm hoping that this interview, and continuously speaking on the truth, and just saying what needs to be said, I think, hopefully, just inspires some folks, like, "Go out and do the works there. You just got to find the right people to do it with. And find the right relationships to use. And you can do it, and you might change your community."

SM: I'd like to thank you for sitting down with us today and sharing your experiences. I appreciate it.

MM: Thank you.

End of recording.