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(Don Elmer) Well thank you very much for coming in. It's good to meet you in person. (Ana Maria Archila) Nice to meet you too.

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(DE) To begin, I just like to ask you about how you happened to

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stumble into community organizing? How did that happen?

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(AMA) So I am of a generation of Red Diaper Babies [who's parents were members of the U. S. Communist Party or sympathetic to its aims].

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My Dad was... Back in Columbia where I where I was born and where I lived

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until I was seventeen, my Dad had been involved in

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student organizing and connected to also some

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farm worker movements in my early childhood. So I grew up

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surrounded by people that were talking about transforming the country and were talking about politics and I

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think that experience really shaped the way I looked at the world.

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When I moved here in 1996, I was seventeen,

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didn't speak English, and kind of

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trying to figure out who I was and being here without...

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Feeling that experience of being uprooted and also feeling the

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experience of not being able to communicate, and the response of the people that

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I was surrounded by, was really intense and it

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really deeply humbled me and also made me feel in the way

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that I had never felt: discrimination. And made me feel, you know,

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lovelessness from others, and from the system.

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One of the first experiences I had when I moved here was trying to...my Dad and I went

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to the local high school in the town to sign me up for high school, for twelfth grade.

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and the people in that high school insisted that I really shouldn't

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sign up for high school. That I should go and take my GED or just go somewhere else,

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to a community college, and my dad fought really hard and threatened to sue the town for discrimination.

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And so...and today one of the issues that I work on the most is actually

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the education for English language learners. I was one,

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and I know so many young people whose parents maybe feel less equipped to fight

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and who...and who end up losing out on

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their opportunities to get an education.

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So right after I finished college, I wanted to work with young immigrants. I really felt like that...

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I felt very connected to that experience in my life and felt like I wanted to do something.

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My aunt was actually the founder of a community based

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organization called Latin American Integration Center [LAIC] that was a service,

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primarily service organization for Latinos, at the time. She said, "Well, come

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work in this part of New York City called Staten Island. There are lots

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of young immigrants there." In my mind I thought I'm gonna be able to do youth programs;

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I'm gonna be able to do art programs with young people. It turned out that,

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yes, there were lots of young people in Staten Island and there were lots of young

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immigrants from Mexico. But they weren't talking to us because they wanted to be part of

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a youth program. They were workers. They were not going to school.

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They were supporting their families back home. They were...They just were living a life

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that even though they were fifteen or sixteen was not really the life of a young

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person the way I imagined it. That really...I think that really

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shook me up intensely.

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Because I knew that what was different about the young men that were living in Staten Island.

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My brother, who was fifteen or sixteen at the time, was that...

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My brother was documented and he had parents who had an education.

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These other kids were undocumented and their parents didn't

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have a chance to go to school. So they also didn't have a chance to go to school.

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So just living that, I think, sealed my

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commitment and clarified for me

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what was important to fight for. (DE) Wow. So then,

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so you worked there and then how long were you there?

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(AMA) So I worked in Staten Island for about a year and a half

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doing different things: teaching English; leading workshops about worker's rights,

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education rights. Then the organization went through a really...

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Then I started doing actual youth organizing work with young people in Queens

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around the Dream Act [Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors]. Young people that were in high school

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and that were the young people that I had initially imagined working with.

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We started doing work around the Dream Act. That was my first kind of introduction to organizing

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and it was incredible.

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I met amazing, extremely powerful and beautiful young people

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who had so much intelligence, and talent,

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and potential, and ideas, and were really stuck because they didn't have documents.

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They were nearing their high school graduation and didn't

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have a chance to go to college. So that was my introduction to

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working with people to try to change policies.

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Around the same time, our organization also started doing some work around education policies,

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specifically in New York City around English language learners.

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We had always been doing, since the beginning of that,

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work around getting new citizens to become actively

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engaged in the political process as voters. So, very traditional

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citizenship campaigns and citizenship education and

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political education around the election and how does the system work here. But it wasn't quite organizing.

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It was kind of like political education, but not collective decision making not

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confrontational in the way that organizing can be. So we have some of

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the elements of organizing but didn't have the traditional,

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"this is how you do organizing in the US" knowledge. I think that through our work

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our work with the Dream Act and then our work in education, we began to meet

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other organizations, kind of see other people doing their work. That's how we came in touch with

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Make the Road by Walking, at the time. So it was back in 2003

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that I started working alongside Make the Road by Walking

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on education issues and language access issues. That relationship

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was absolutely important for me in my own learning about what

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organizing could be, and how the communities that I was working with and

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working for, could exercise power in a much more intense

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and fruitful way. That relationship eventually developed into

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the merger of the two organizations into one: Make the Road New York.

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(DE) What was your role in the...? (AMA) At LAIC? (DE) Yes.

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(AMA) So I was initially the coordinator of our work in Staten Island

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and became the executive director in 2003. So from 2003 to 2007,

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which was when we merged with Make the Road by Walking

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to create Make the Road New York, I was the executive director of that organization.

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(DE) So that merger brought the two organizations together, and then you have this three-headed...

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(AMA) This triumvirate, yes. (DE) Triumvirate. That sounds better. (AMA) Yes. We had this three-headed monster...

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A beautiful monster! I love it! (DE) Very good. I'd be curious about

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who or what inspired you in this process, whether

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they're a part of organizing or not. Who were your inspirations for

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doing organizing? You didn't mention your parents, your father.

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(AMA) I think different people along the way inspired me.

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I think there is one guy, one young person in Staten Island that I met.

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He worked in the deli across the street from our office. His name is Cristoforo.

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He was working kind of cutting meats and

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doing the work of the deli long days, like twelve hour days.

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Then he would come to classes--English classes.

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In talking to him I kind of convinced him to get the other young people in that deli

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to get together and claim all the wages that they were owed. They were getting paid

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three dollars an hour working twelve hour days and working

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six days a week, sometimes seven days a week.

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I think he was sixteen years old at the time.

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Despite the fact he had such like such a difficult life,

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he was always extremely joyful and super

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excited about learning English, and kind of willing to take risks that were

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really scary. I thought about confronting his employer and

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losing his job and finding a new job. He had the responsibility of sending money back home. I think he

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of all the people that I met, he's the one that seems

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most memorable because I did a lot of learning just working with him.

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Then, with his friends that were

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working at the deli, we were able to recover a significant amount of money

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for the wages that had been stolen from them.

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I think other people that have inspired me a lot...

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I've had the good fortune of meeting amazing organizers over the

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last seven or eight years. I think my co-directors,

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Andrew [Friedman] and Oona [Chatterjee], are actually two of the people that inspire me the most,

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for different reasons.

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Oona and I have done quite a bit of work around education together.

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She always...before I even knew very much about Make the Road New York,

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in our coalition work she always had a way of

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just listening, very well, and just saying

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very few things, but that were very very important things.

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I knew the organization that she led was

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a kick ass organization, so it was confusing for me to see someone so...

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show up so humbly, and also had the ability

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to just say the correct things, with the correct effort,

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with the correct kind of level of energy. That was really amazing for me,

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and I wanted to get really close to that.

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I think Andrew also is...he can be...

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he's kind of a super...on the level of smart and amazingness

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of organizers. He's really, I think, at the very very top.

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But he's also...I think what I found really

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important for me, and one of the reasons why I was interested in the idea

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of merging, was that he, Andrew,

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does NOT believe in just organizing from anger alone.

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That there's a lot that our communities have. Yes, we are pissed off about lots of

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things that are bad in the world and that are bad for us, but

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there's also a lot of joy. There's also a lot of knowledge and there's a lot of

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energy. I think the way he connects with

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people, the way he connects with members and decision makers

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really allows people to just to be complete; to show

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when they're pissed off and also when they're really happy. I think that's

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a really wonderful thing, important. I think that the model of

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organizing that we have at Make the Road New York is very intense

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in the level of connection between people.

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It's full of joy and it's also very militant and very feisty.

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I think both...I think it's a combination of

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all the leadership that Andrew [Friedman], Oona [Chatterjee], and now I,

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have been able to share, to create [these spaces?].

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I like them. Even today, two years into the merger I like them.

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(DE) I'd also be interested in how

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social movements or important political moments

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have influenced you as an organizer.

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Or influenced you as a person. (AMA) Yeah.

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I was still early in my political development when

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9/11 happened. I was working in Staten Island

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where lots of workers--lots of Mexican workers--there

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lived in Staten Island, worked in downtown Manhattan. I was seeing

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the way that families were experiencing a lot of pain because they couldn't find

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their family members. They couldn't access the resources.

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I think that was a really difficult

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and confusing moment for me that,

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I think, became really clear when I realized...

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my political understanding and development accelerated

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as I watched the government just launch

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a full front attack against South Asian immigrants and Arab and Muslim immigrants.

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I just never thought I'm gonna see in my lifetime,

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the Government of United States do yet another

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massive effort of racial profiling.

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And it happened. And so,

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we would go to rallies and vigils in front of

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the office of INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] where there were like hundreds of people lined up.

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Muslim families lined up accompanying

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the young man and the men of their family that we're being asked to register

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as part of the special registration program. And many of them went into the offices

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of INS and never came out. The special registration program I think

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really just elevated the sense of urgency for me

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personally about the importance of talking about immigration,

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talking about race, talking about

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the tensions in our country in the most honest way.

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I think that was an important moment for my political development

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here in the US. It also just elevated for me

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the urgency about using my skills, and my abilities,

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and my life to

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build political power for immigrant communities.

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Because the level of powerless that we were experiencing was so incredible.

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The policies that were coming out

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that were targeting our communities were so wrongheaded and so

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abusive in so many ways.

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But I think the

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other piece that I think has been really important in my life was

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actually growing up Columbia.

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Columbia is a beautiful place, but it also has a very divided society where

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the class structure is very very strong. People have

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a lot of internalized oppression and desire to oppress other people.

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I think I had the good luck of growing up with parents

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who always pointed to me

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how wrong that was and helped me understand that respect

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and dignity for were for everyone, not

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just for those that have more or were whiter or were prettier.

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And I think that basic lesson of

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respecting humanity was

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at the core of who I am today. (DE) Another question

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has to do with what kind of accomplishments

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have happened in this process with the organizations you've been

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with that you feel most proud of being a part of.

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(AMA) I think

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as Make the Road New York, we've been able to lead some really important

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campaigns that have resulted in real policy change in New York City.

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One of the campaigns that we worked on for the longest

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time was a civil rights campaign around...

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a campaign about language access in city government.

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It took us a very long time to build

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momentum. We started with a very good but kind of

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small victory. making sure that there was language access in the welfare offices in the city.

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Then language access, translation and interpretation for parents who don't

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speak English in the schools, and then in the hospitals,

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across the entire state. But it was really last year Mayor Bloomberg signed

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the first executive order of its kind in the nation that

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mandates translation and interpretation

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for all city agencies across entire city. And that I think was

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a very important victory that I feel very proud of because it really

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is the kind of victory that's really based on people's daily life experience. People said,

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"I don't understand what my doctor is saying." "I can't sign up my child for

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this program that he needs because I can't communicate with the people at the school."

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"My food stamps were cut and I can't communicate with the person

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at the welfare office to make sure that that I can feed my family." I think

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the fact that we as an organization we were

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able to really hear that and elevate

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the urgency of that issue and actually accomplish a victory that will be long lasting

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for New York City and also that's a model for the rest of the country: I feel incredibly

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proud of that. But I think the thing that I'm most proud of is the fact that

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our organization has really...I think over the last ten

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years of our collective work we've really been able to to transform the way

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that immigrants are perceived by the power

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establishment in the city. I think the fact that

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Mayor Bloomberg in his campaign did a platform just on

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immigrant issues is very telling. It's the first time that a citywide elected official

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does that in the city of New York, a city of immigrants. I think

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that's really a testament to the work that we have been able to do and that

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we've done with our allies in the city. But I feel like Make the Road New York has

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played a very important role in advancing

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a progressive immigrant rights agenda in the city, and making it be real,

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and making elected officials feel the heat all of our communities

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on many issues, on many fronts: in the schools, in the hospitals,

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in the work place, in our streets.

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I think that we really kind of transformed

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the power dynamic for low wage immigrant families,

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immigrant workers in the city. I feel pretty proud of that.

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(DE) Along those lines, I'd be curious to know

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what you would like to see happen

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in the next five to ten years with your organization and what would you like to see

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in terms of a vision for organizing in general.

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(AMA) I think for my organization first, for Make the Road New York,

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we are at a moment of entering a second stage

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of our lives I think. It feels like to me like our adolescent is kind of coming to an end.

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[DE laughs] We're kind of entering into the world of adulthood in the ways that

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we think about the political our political analysis,

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the way that

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we exercise our collective power,

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the kinds of actions that we decide to have, the ways that we relate to

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government and power brokers. So I think for

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us what I want is to be able to actually enter into

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that much more mature space, with more... Have more tools

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to better...that we haven't used before. Like being able to exercise our

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electoral muscle better, being able to use technology

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in the way that advances our work, being able to

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be in relation with other powerful institutions like unions, like

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other important grassroots organizations

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in a much more sophisticated way. I think that that will continue to change New York city for the better.

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I think we can we can take our model beyond

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New York City also. I think we're at that place in our development where

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we have something that we know works, and we can try

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to distill it to its essence and take

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it somewhere else and build power in other places, and maybe begin to think about what's happening

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in the state of New York and how can we change things beyond New York City.

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For...I think in

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organizing in the US I think we're still trying to figure out what our role is

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in this Obama age.

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Because we're used to being just in a posture of confrontation and

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resistance and have very little experience being somewhat

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inside and having more access and more of the ear

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of government. I think what I hope for us is that

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we remain...

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that we emphasize the importance of being deeply rooted

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in real communities. It's very tempting to be close to power.

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I think that's something that we as a movement

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have to learn how to do: be close to power,

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exercise power from inside, and also be actually accountable to the people that

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are living communities across the country that rely on our organizations to

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to advance a progressive agenda.

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But I think we will also, five years from now, as a movement,

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we will have learned a lot about...we will have

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learned and become much more sophisticated

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because there's many more opportunities to exercise power in a different way and

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to advance our work in a different way.

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I hope we generate ideas

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that are deeply rooted in people's experiences

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and that are also visionary, because

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the economic crisis that we're facing right now

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is it something that we haven't lived before.

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It's something that we have yet to see the end of. I know that for New York City

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and New York State, the level of budget cuts that we're gonna see in the schools and in the hospitals

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is gonna be unprecedented, and I'm not sure that we are prepared

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at ALL, or that our communities are prepared in any way to kind of face that reality.

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So I think we have to figure out as a movement how to be how to be able to support

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people in crisis a lot more than

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than we have so far. A lot more than we have had to do so far.

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A lot of our organizations are structured in a way that

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a lot of us have been very dogmatic about the connection between services

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and organizing, the connection between...

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yeah, I guess services and organizing. I think... Well, Make the

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Road New York has walked away from that dogma. We have decided that we are as much community

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center as we are a center of political action.

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But I think...

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I think our organizations are gonna have to face the question of how do we support...our troops

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basically, in a moment of crisis much more than we ever did before.

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I think we're gonna come up against the dogma of organizing much more than we have had to do.

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So I'm curious how we come out of that. [DE laughs] (DE) Very good.

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I'd be interested in

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how you operate beyond yourselves. I take it that

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you've done a lot of the work in, what, at least three parts

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of New York and maybe more. Do you have alliances that are important for you here

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and maybe alliances nationally as well? How does that all stack up?

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Yeah. All the work that we have done over the last

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years, all our organizing work on workplace justice; on education; and civil

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rights; on environmental justice; on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender rights

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has been done in partnership with allies. We are very

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clear that we cannot do...

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cannot do it alone. We don't have as an organization the power to win significant

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policy change--in the city or in the state--just by ourselves.

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We have a lot to learn from other people, other partners,

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and other allies. So we have a very deep connections with immigrant

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organizations in New York City and in New York State--the New York Immigration Coalition in

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particular is kind of one of our closest allies--and also have a really strong connections with

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the housing world, housing organizing world in the city, and the

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gay rights movement in the city and the state.

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At the national level, we are also maturing into a

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much more sophisticated partnership with National allies like the Center for Community Change

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and the National Council of La Raza and other organizations.

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We're also part of the Right to the City Alliance which is a new formation

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of grassroots organizing groups that has emerged over the last three or four years.

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And you know...

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at least in the work that we've done around

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immigration reform, we've really had the opportunity to

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struggle with the tensions between

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grassroots community-based organizations and Washington-based organizations and national organizations.

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I think in that struggle I think we've been able to learn some important lessons that

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I think have made us be better positioned, I think, for the

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health care reform debate and for the upcoming immigration debate.

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So I think that all of our organizations are kind of in a very

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important process of development together.

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We feel like we're very much learning how to do that thing that

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we need to do. Right? How to be in relationship with each other correctly.

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We're learning. (DE) Good. This is a question that I've asked a lot of organizers.

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Have you found the way to balance your

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personal and professional lives? Or is that just too much?

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What's that like for you?

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(AMA) I don't think I have found the right way.

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but I think that there are...we...I have been very lucky and my organization

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has been very lucky to be part of an experiment

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around this particular issue, around the sustainability of ourselves

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and our organizations through the work that we've been doing with Social Justice

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Leadership, which is an organization specifically devoted to

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supporting grassroots organizing groups

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to figure out how to be

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sustainable for the long term, and also in the process of

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ideological development and improving our performance continuously.

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Social Justice Leadership was founded by organizers from California

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and from other parts that were really worried about the question,

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about the inability of our organizations to retain people

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and to support them beyond the ten years.

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They were really worried about seeing so many people burn out and after they have

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accumulated so much important experience leave the movement.

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So they came to New York City and started working with, initially, just with the EDs of several

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community organizing groups in the city, and now are leading a project

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called Transformative Organizing Initiative that has I think close to fifteen organizations

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and around hundred people engaged in

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their own personal development and in thinking about organizational development

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ideologically, in terms of sustainability and in terms of performance.

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I think we are kind of very invested in the question of how to be sustainable,

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how to do that and I think what SJL [Social Justice Leadership]

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highlighted for all of us in New York City is that

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in order to be able to sustain our work over time,

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we as individuals have to want to do that. Our organization have to be committed to

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do that and the movement has to be committed to do that. So the work is at different levels.

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but I think inside Make the Road New York, we're not into the idea

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running people to the ground. That's not our model. We

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don't...we try do...we have policies,

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personnel policies, that are really supportive of people taking time off,

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that are really supportive of people working manageable workloads.

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But even then the demand and the pressures on the

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organization are very intense. We did a survey recently of our entire staff.

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It's about seventy people, and eighty percent of them said

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they're overwhelmed. Ninety percent of them said that they're absolutely

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committed to the organization. So we know that there is the commitment and we have to work on

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that issue of being overwhelmed because obviously there's a lot of wasted energy that goes with that.

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But we know it's an organizational issue as much as it maybe

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an issue about someone being able to work on the balance.

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I don't think the question of balance is

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just about organizing. I think it's a question of the modern world. (DE) True. Yeah. (AMA) I feel like

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people are working all the time because there's almost no option and

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there is no alternative. So to the extent that we actually pay

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attention to that I think we're making a huge step. We're taking a huge step in the right direction.

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(DE) Yeah, I admire the fact that you're doing that as an organization and not

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leaving that question up to each individual to deal with alone, which is

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generally what happens. So that's very good.

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When you look at your life as an organizer, what parts of organizing

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really fit your personality, and as a

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result of that particular part of organizing is very easy for you?

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And what part of organizing is much more challenging and maybe difficult

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that you have to deal with? Does that make sense? (AMA) Mm-hmm, yeah.

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So when I think about the work of

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building a base and creating spaces where people can connect to each other

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and building actually deep relationships with people, I think that

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is the part that for me is the most exciting and

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the most true to who I am. I feel like

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I have a lot of... I experience

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a lot of discovery in conversations with people, and appreciation,

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and constant reaffirmation of how

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amazing people are. So that part feels really true to me.

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I have a hard time with conflict and it really is hard.

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In my family I'm kind of like the one that doesn't want to go there.

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It's a little bit beyond kind of my...

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the need to be confrontative [confrontational] and to be pushy

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to advance our work--although I find it very exciting

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and it definitely is energizing--I also

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have a hard time with it almost every time. Which is funny,

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because really that's so much part of organizing.

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But it's also really awesome, once

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we're in the moment of collectively

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exercising our power and seeing the people on the other side

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hear it for the first time, really hear it in a forceful way, do what's right.

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That's really very exciting.

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I think unfortunately a lot of

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just the way that organizing happens in this country...

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it's complicated by the need

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to be able to finance it. So the work of raising money

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is exhausting and it's...

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Yeah. It's exhausting and I often feel like

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we end up having to spend so much energy on that.

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I see in my organization how much energy

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we end up spending raising money to support our work--which is important--

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but how that creative energy could be used to

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advance the actual work. So that that feels like

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almost like unresolvable tension and challenge.

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Unfortunately, it's part of organizing in the US. (DE) Well, I really wanna

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thank you for coming in. This is great to meet you in person. (AMA) Thank you.

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(DE) Thank you again. [Ends with "4:46" remaining on video clock].

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hello