

# **AN INTERVIEW WITH BRIAN SHEPHERD**

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

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Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project

I Can't Breathe: Las Vegas Protests for Systemic Justice

Oral History Research Center at UNLV

University Libraries

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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©I Can't Breathe: Las Vegas Protests for Systemic Justice  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2020

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The Oral History Research Center enables students and staff to work together with community members to generate this selection of first-person narratives. The participants in this project thank the university for the support given that allowed an idea the opportunity to flourish.

The transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project: I Can't Breathe, Las Vegas Protests for Systemic Justice.

Claytee D. White, Project Director  
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## PREFACE

Brian Shepherd grew up in a rowhouse outside of Philadelphia in a neighborhood more working poor than middle class. His dad grew up in Scotland, where family circumstances meant he and his brothers cycled in and out of foster care. A stint in the British Merchant Navy brought him to America where he fell in love and married an American girl, moving permanently to the U.S. in 1975. Shepherd was born the next year. His father worked a variety of nonunion construction jobs but took a nearly 50 percent pay cut for a union painting and maintenance position at a school district. “Always take a job with union benefits,” was his dad’s advice.

Early in his teens, Shepherd developed a rebellious streak and had some run-ins with the law—violating curfew, breaking into lockers, getting into fights. His parents decided to use a “scared straight” approach and convinced a police detective to “throw the book” at their son. Shepherd spent eighteen months in a youth correctional home, complete with “cottage parents.”

Looking back, he saw this time as an especially formative period. As a White kid in a residential program for troubled and at-risk youth, he found himself in the minority. He saw how he was treated differently because of how he looked and how he could assimilate. He realized his circumstances were very different from most of the residents, who were people of color. While finances at home were tight, his family was not destitute. They had hope, they had expectations, they had options. Shepherd learned early that not everyone does. He didn’t know how to describe it then, but today he recognizes it as White privilege.

He observed, he listened, he learned while he was part of the residential program, examining his world from different perspectives, reading books like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and becoming more empathetic. When he left the program, he changed his ways, graduated from high school, then joined the Navy, attended community college, got married, and eventually dropped out to become a union organizer.

A job with the Service Employees International Union brought Shepherd to Las Vegas after the union’s protections were threatened by shifting political winds in the state and changes to collective bargaining laws. Later the pandemic made contract issues like health insurance coverage more fraught as lower-level hospital support workers were suddenly deemed essential, with Shepherd noting, “I can’t imagine saying to somebody that an hour’s worth of your life is worth less than \$15 an hour. I can’t imagine saying to somebody, ‘You work for me forty-plus hours a week, but I’m not going to make sure you have healthcare coverage in the middle of a pandemic.’ ”

For Shepherd, the words “social justice” are not just buzz words. He sees in a large international union like SEIU that membership is both diverse and divided. There’s a tension among members between Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter. How do you include all perspectives? Contract issues, are, of course, important, but Shepherd wants to include all members in a larger

discussion: SEIU has not shied away from this challenge, instead explicitly stating its goal that SEIU move forward as an antiracist organization.

Shepherd's observation is heartrending. "But for us, again, with our members and with other folks, we fight against injustice on the job, but that injustice does not stop the second you clock out. For our members of color, whether they're undocumented folks, whether they're Latinx or whether they're Black, how they experience life in the community, to me is almost more important than what their experience is on the job. Because a contract is meaningless if you have to worry every single day about your sons being pulled over and targeted."

Shepherd has continually witnessed discrimination in many guises. He continues to lead, educate, and negotiate. In addition to organizing specific union-related strikes, he's coordinated community protests concerning larger issues like Black Lives Matter. His fight for social and economic justice for all continues.

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I Can't Breathe:  
Las Vegas Protests for Systemic Justice Oral History Project



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July 11, 2020

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**Today is July 13, 2020. My name is Claytee White, in the Oral History Research Center at UNLV. I'm with Brian today.**

**Brian, could you please pronounce and spell your name for me?**

Brian Shepherd, S-H-E-P-H-E-R-D.

**And Brian is the regular way?**

I-A-N. Regular is a matter of context.

**That's right. Thank you. Brian, just to get us started, tell me a bit about your early life; when and where you were born; about your parents.**

I was born in 1976, which is a pretty significant year for this country. I was born in Norristown, Pennsylvania, which is just outside of Philadelphia. My dad had just immigrated to the country in 1975. I think they wrote letters back then, and so my dad and my mom, who was born in the United States, engaged in a long-distance relationship over letters because my father's brother, Patrick, had immigrated here a couple of years before and his wife set the two of them up together.

**Where are they from?**

My mom was born in Norristown, Pennsylvania, the same as me. My dad was born in, I believe, Newcastle, England, but he was raised in Scotland, and he was in and out of their foster care system as a young child, and he had three brothers.

**Were they all in the system?**

They were. A lot of what I know about that my dad, being from an older generation, [is that he] does not like to talk about his past, and so my last name is Shepherd, but I actually have no relation to anybody named Shepherd. That was my grandmother's married name. She had four children out of wedlock in the 1940s. She had a whole separate family and she had four boys



outside of marriage in the 1940s. It's something that my father, if he knew I was sharing this story publicly, would be deeply embarrassed about, but I think it definitely contributes to who he is and the adversity he went through as a young man.

**Oh, definitely. I would love to hear her story. It's probably so powerful. What did your father do for a living once he arrived?**

He worked at nonunion construction jobs. He came here, he was in the Merchant Marines for Great Britain and was what they call bosun, which is a fancy way of saying basically, he was the supervisor of the deckhands on a ship, so a very hard job. He worked construction jobs until he got a union job at a school district as...I'm not sure. His trade was painting, but I'm pretty sure he was hired as a maintenance man and worked a lot on painting school buildings. I remember him telling me at a very young age—I can't remember what he was getting paid then, but I think he took something like a 50 percent pay cut to get that job because he told me, "Always take the job with union benefits; always take the job with benefits even if you get paid less."

**Evidently you listened.**

Yes. It took me a while to understand what he was talking about, but yes.

**Wonderful. Tell me a little about your education and how you got to Las Vegas.**

That's a long story.

**Take your time.**

I grew up outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Luckily I grew up in the same—well, I was born in a different house, but for most of my life I grew up in the same house. My parents are still married to this day. We lived in a rowhome, which are not very common out here, but back east you'll have blocks of houses that are connected to one another, very narrow three-story buildings.

**Here it's a townhouse.**

Yes, sort of, yes. Yes, I guess it would be equivalent to a townhouse. That's right. But there's whole neighborhoods that are like this. Every block is like that. There are very few standalone homes. I went to elementary, middle, and high school all in that area. I've had some twists and turns. I don't know how far you want me to get into my history.

**You may be free to share as much as you'd like to.**

Well, then let's put it this way. I had some run-ins with the law at a very young age and was sent to...I'm not sure what they call it nowadays, but a correctional facility, a residential correctional facility, and that's an important part of my story because that's a very formative moment where I got to understand race and class, though I wouldn't have been able to articulate that as a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old, but now looking back on it, it's where I developed a lot of ideas that I have today through that year and a half there. But then I came back to go to high school. I could go back to that story if you like. Then I joined the Navy when I graduated high school, and I was seventeen years old at that time.

**Yes, please go back to that understanding of race and class. Give me an idea of what you mean.**

There are a couple of things that really stand out, I think, after I went through it. I'm not sure I was acutely aware of—well, I was acutely aware, the first thing, that I was a minority. I was aware that there were less White people than other colors of folks that were around me. That's definitely one thing. That was the first thing I noticed. One of the other formative moments was I was there for doing, I guess, what you could consider minor teenage things: violating curfew, breaking into kids' lockers to get extra money for the weekend, getting in fights. Not to diminish any of those things, but compared to some of the other young men that I was living with...There

was one guy in particular; his name was Donald. He was a brilliant guy, African American young man. He was there because he had a two-year-old daughter, and he was selling drugs on the streets of North Philadelphia. My friend Lamont was a Crip in Pittsburgh. Their levels of experiencing violence were different. Even though I think growing up in a poor working-class neighborhood I experienced violence at the home and just walking down the street, it was not the same level that they experienced violence on a daily basis.

There was a guy—I've thought about looking him up over the years because he actually helped with a very valuable lesson—his name was Delano. He was a gang member as well. He was from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. I think when I met him I was fifteen. Now I'm six foot two, 210 pounds; I'm a pretty big guy. When I was fifteen years old, I must have been five foot four, a 120 pounds, I was a runt. I did not start growing until my senior year of high school. I was always way behind, and I was always a year younger than everybody else because my birthday's in October and I started school when I was four. Delano was probably about six foot two, two hundred and twenty pounds as a seventeen-year-old, so he was basically a man, and a lot of the other kids looked up to him.

He started reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* [who wrote and collaborated with] Alex Haley. That made my life enormously complicated, just speaking from a personal standpoint. When Delano started reading the autobiography, he started organizing. I wouldn't have been able to use that word back then. He started organizing the other Black kids who lived in our house. They called them [adult supervisors] cottage parents, so basically like the live-in counselor at our particular home thought that he would teach us a very valuable lesson about racism. The lesson he taught us—again, this would have been in 1991 or '92. You probably couldn't get away with this today. He decided that he was going to segregate everybody, so we

couldn't eat meals together; we couldn't play basketball together; we couldn't watch TV together; we couldn't do chores together; we couldn't be roommates with one another. In that experience my best friend, my roommate Pierre, who is a Black kid from Easton, Pennsylvania, after that experience never talked to me—we talked, but we never had the same relationship again.

I remember that's where I first heard the phrase, "Yeah, but you're not really White." That was when I first started to hear the difference...I think those young brothers had a misconception of what it meant to be Black as well, but that's where I started to learn what people meant when they said, "You're acting Black," or, "You're acting White." I think that changed me. That really did have an impact on how I saw...My friend Don, who I referenced earlier, he gets out. He's out for two weeks. Well, what is he going to do? He's going to do the same thing that got him there because he has no options, and so he ended up then in a maximum-security facility, we heard. Whereas what I realized—

A lot of people to this day still think, oh, you must have a degree. I remember I was in Iowa. People were like, "Oh, what's your Ph.D. in?" I was like, "I barely graduated high school. I joined the Navy. I went to two years of community college, and I did really well in community college, but then I dropped out to become a union organizer, and now I'm going back to seminary, but that's like twenty-plus years later."

But if I've got to trace it back, that and the fact that my best friend growing up—his name was Richard—was Korean, and people used to make fun of him for being Korean, myself included, I made fun of him for being Korean, which I'm ashamed to say now. I think those were really important lessons about race for me.

I know I said a lot there.

**No, that's wonderful. One follow-up question I have. How did you end up there as a White boy at that time with what you were doing compared to what the other kids were doing?**

**I'm surprised that you ended up there.**

Yes, that is absolutely a hundred percent correct. If my parents did not conspire with a local police detective to get me arrested, I most likely would not have been in that situation. Again, I think my parents were older when they had me. My mom was in her mid-thirties when she had me, which, again, in 1976 would have been a very late pregnancy. If I'm truthful, I'm not sure my parents ever wanted to have me, and so I think they really struggled with being working class poor, which they would not identify themselves. They would say they are middle class, but they were working class poor. I think they struggled because they had to piece together a lot of jobs. My dad worked the night shift. He had to pick up spare jobs on the weekend. My mom cleaned offices and worked as a crossing guard and then worked as a janitor. They weren't around a lot. I think because they didn't know quite how to handle me as a rebellious independent child, the process began.

I can remember in middle school—I cannot remember the assistant principal's name—but they were baffled by me. They said, “I don't understand. You get straight As in school, but then you never turn in a homework assignment.” I don't know if that was a level of self-sabotage. I know we're getting into my own psychoanalysis right now.

But I think if my parents had not intentionally gone to this detective, if they didn't have a personal relationship with him, and they did not ask him to throw the book at me, I would not have been in that situation. I can say at the time I hated them for it. I appreciate it now because it changed the course of my life, it really did in a very positive way. Because if not for that, I don't think I would have been able to shape my views.

**Yes. You could have been the one in that maximum security.**

It's possible, yes. I could have just kept escalating or getting worse, or I could have ended up with a dead-end job just trying to make it.

**I was going to talk about Las Vegas next. How did you get to Las Vegas?**

The Service Employees International Union brought me here. At the time, in 2014, I was traveling around the country, working mostly in the South and Southwest of the United States as the organizing director for SEIU. I took that job specifically because I wanted to go to places where it was difficult to organize, where there was a lot of injustice. I was working in Houston, Texas. There were about 13,000 city workers, mostly Black folks that were getting threatened with losing their health insurance, and so I was helping them rebuild that organization.

Then I was supposed to just come to Las Vegas one day; it was July of 2014. I was just supposed to come there to listen to the local union, hear what challenges they were having. They were trying to elect a Clark County commissioner at the time. They lost that race in the primary. They spent a lot of money to try to win that race. Then I got assigned to work with the local here. If you remember in 2014 that November election was pretty devastating to Democratic politics. Republicans had the governor, the Assembly and the Senate. Then all the sudden this local union that was already struggling was now facing extinction because of collective bargaining law changes and a whole host of attacks on labor unions and working people going on in the 2015 legislative session. As that was all developing, I said, "We're going to move here. We're going to get right in the middle of it." We were living in Washington State at the time.

**July of 2014, was it as warm as today?**

It was, yes. Remember at that time I was working in Houston, which is a different kind of hot in Houston. It is muggy. There are hurricanes. I was like, “I think I can deal with the dry heat.”

Because in Houston, you walk from your car to the building, you’re sweating.

**Yes, yes.**

Here we don’t have that problem.

**Other than the weather, what were your first memories of the city? The political well-being, yes.**

I think the criticism about Las Vegas that I’ve heard from a lot of outsiders is that people go to Las Vegas to be somebody else. I have a different assessment. I think people come to Las Vegas from around the country and around the world to be themselves. They’re just unencumbered by inhibition, right? I think that’s...Las Vegas, the Strip, when we think about the Strip. I think it allows people to turn off whatever inhibition, and I think that’s who they really are when they’re partying and then messing around.

I think the first thing I recognized about Las Vegas is that it’s normal...We represent hospital workers, so there are hospitals. There are schools. There are church communities. There are parks. There’s all this other stuff outside of what people typically think of as Las Vegas. Yes, that was a different side that I don’t think I ever looked for when I visited in Nevada. I liked it.

**Good. During that trying time for unions, did you align at any way with the Culinary Union?**

Yes, we, along with the AFL-CIO, Culinary and the Teachers Union, so many of us at that time were, yes, fighting together to make sure that working people continued to have a seat at the table. But I was pretty new, so for me it was a lot of...I wasn’t new to the labor movement, but I was new to Nevada, and so it was also kind of learning the ropes, learning the process,

understanding, building relationships with legislators that I just started to meet. Some of those relationships continue on today.

**Good. I love it. Tell me about living in the city. Where did you and your family move to?**

We live in Henderson, though I spend almost all my time in the city of Las Vegas because that's where our office is and that's where a lot of our members are. We moved to Henderson.

We have had a child in San Diego, California; we've had a child in Olympia, Washington; we had a child in Houston, Texas; and then my daughter was born here at St. Rose Sienna in Henderson. My wife has become an expert at...Because we've lived in a couple of places in between there as well where we didn't have kids, my wife has really developed a system for finding schools, affordability, and our general safety, and so that's how we ended up in our particular neighborhood.

**She did a great job.**

Yes, yes.

**I'm going to switch now to talk about racism because I respect some of the things that you had to say as I was getting to meet you. So Black people have to have "the talk" with their children. What is that like *not* to have that? What happens when you're telling your sons about how to act as young men? How does that differ?**

I'll be honest. It's a little frustrating sometimes because I've seen my kids walk around—well, there's a tension. Let me say that. Let me start with that. There's a tension because I don't want my children to grow up with the same fears and worries that I had to grow up with. They'll never know what it's like to be—well, as of so far, they have not known what it's like to be hungry. They don't know what it's like to walk down the street and worry about your personal safety.



And so in some ways that's honestly frustrating to me that they have it a little bit too easy, and they don't really understand struggle.

We've had that talk, but I think to them it's very...it's intellectual in one sense, so it's theoretical. And then because they've grown up around so many different types of cultures and races, they just have a different outlook in a way that—again, that's the gift of the union, because they refer to people as auntie or uncles who do not look like us at all. They've been surrounded by that since birth, so it's a little bit different. I don't know what the typical experience is, but for them it's...They have a hard time understanding why.

**Yes. Tell me about the work at the union. Once the conflict back in 2014 was over, tell me what it's been like at the union. And bring it up to today. You told me a little about your trying to help some of your friends understand systemic racism.**

Yes. I came back—even though I was living here since late 2014, in 2016 I went back on the road, and I officially came back to work a year June of 2018. As we've worked with the local union here, most recently our union has started to engage our members and have conversations about, what does it mean to be an antiracist organization? How do we have conversations with our members that what you look like or where you live shouldn't determine whether or not you're safe or healthy? Helping people understand that the pandemic has definitely been a challenge to millions of people across this country, but Black people have been bearing the brunt of these challenges in a different kind of way, because the jobs that are seen as essential now were not considered essential a few months ago. Trying to really have these conversations, not just about excessive use of force by the police, though the minimum is to deal with that. But how does racism impact hiring? How does racism impact employer policies? How does racism impact us as a union?

Now again, in our union, because we represent healthcare workers, because we represent public service workers, our executive board, for example, is I think 90 percent women, over 80 percent people of color, so it's a little bit different because so many of our members are women or people of color. But it is a challenge because there still are people who do not fall into that category who have experienced what's going on in the country, in the world as an attack on them. Our challenge has been: How do we not just write those folks off? How do we bring them into the conversation? How do we help them understand about why they feel so strongly, or why they need to respond, "All Lives Matter," as soon as you say, "Black Lives Matter?" That's been a challenge and that's something we're currently going through.

**When you get ready to plan—I think your union has been part of some of the protests?**

We have, yes.

**Tell me about planning a rally or a protest, what that's like; what you do.**

There is always an art and a science to this. The science is you need to think about who is your universe that you're targeting. You have to think about who your audience is. You have to think about what are the different ways that you can reach out to people so that they know about something. The art really does come down to understanding relationships.

Another big tension I think for the labor movement, and probably any organization, is not falling into the habit of transactional relationships—that you do something for me, we'll do something for you. And so we've been trying to cultivate, over the past couple of years, relationships with different folks in the community about mutual interests that aren't necessarily immediately impactful to us. When we look at the Strike for Black Lives coming up on July 20, now we, as the union, are not the fundamental ones making the demand. We've talked to different folks in the community. I've met with the president of the NAACP several times. The

question becomes: How do you need our help, or what can we do to lend our organizational support? What is the direction you want to see it go? And that's not always how events like these go. There's an organization; they make a demand. And so we've been trying to have these conversations and figure out what are the needs of the community.

Because for us, you could look at it and say, "Well, it doesn't directly impact the union." You're not talking about wages. You're not talking about benefits. You're not talking about an existing collective bargaining agreement. But for us, again, with our members and with other folks, we fight against injustice on the job, but that injustice does not stop the second you clock out. For our members of color, whether they're undocumented folks, whether they're Latinx or whether they're Black, how they experience life in the community, to me is almost more important than what their experience is on the job. Because a contract is meaningless if you have to worry every single day about your sons being pulled over and targeted.

I know that's a getting outside of your rally question, but going back to your first question, when people actually are willing to listen to their coworkers or fellow union members about that, a change starts to happen. With this protest, it's being clear about what are our demands. It's how do we work with other organizations, and then how do we get the word out to as many people as possible? Again, part of that is mass distribution through Facebook or email or text message. The other part is relational: who's impacted by this issue and how do their self-interests align with involving more people from the workplace?

**During the civil rights movement, a big part of planning was nonviolence. How do you talk about that now, today?**

I don't mean to correct you, but I think a part of the civil rights movement talked about nonviolence, not all the civil rights movement; right?

**Not the Black Power movement. I'm just talking about—oh no, no, no. Oh yes, I'm not talking about by any means necessary.**

I bring that up because I've been studying... There's a wonderful book by Dr. James Cone called *Martin & Malcolm & America*. It really does break down exactly why, and in that book, the civil rights movement in a holistic sense. That's one of the first things, adversaries or opponents would say, why is my union involved in this? There are these riots and people destroying property. We definitely have talked to folks about that. The way we're talking to folks about that is, first, hearing their concerns. We definitely have to hear what they're worried about even though I think it's not a real narrative. How we've talked about it is that, look, all across the country there are people who are disturbed about the killings of unarmed Black Americans, and people are tired of watching that happen with no accountability from the police. We're not advocating violence, but what we are concerned about is state and local officials should actually check the power of the police because we've seen excessive force being used on protestors. Again, the most egregious example—and I wouldn't have this in every conversation—but the most egregious example was when the President of the United States, along with military officers is shooting tear gas and rubber bullets at protestors to go take a picture in front of a church. That should be disturbing to every American. When we talk about it to our community members, we're definitely not advocating violence as a response.

But on a personal note, I think people experience uprisings in different ways, and I don't think I should be telling people how to respond to a legacy of violence against the Black community. I mean, that's my personal opinion, and that's the way I've talked to my neighbors and friends about it, is that even having a take on how people should respond to innocent men and women being murdered on the streets is a form of White supremacy. Again, I wouldn't say

that to our members, but I would definitely say that to people that I know and have a relationship with. And it's hard. It's hard for people to wrestle with. It's hard for people to struggle with because they're like, "Can I be against George Floyd being murdered and be against riots?" But the question is: Why are you talking about those things as if they're the same thing? And helping people unpack that a little bit more.

**The upcoming rally, is this the first one that you've helped to organize during this period?**

We did talk to our members and mobilize folks for the rally on the Westside. It was a few weeks ago? A month ago? All time is getting blurred.

**The really large one in the park?**

Yes. Yes, we helped mobilize people to that. But this is the first one that we are a part of the anchoring coalition to do it, and it's something that is happening in over twenty-five cities all across the United States. It's going to look different in every city based upon what the needs of the community are. In some cases it's fast-food workers and underpaid workers walking off the job. Because when they talk about Black Lives Matter or the movement for Black lives, they don't just mean police shouldn't be killing them. Again, that's the minimum. It's let's talk about Black economic power; let's talk about who's doing these jobs and why don't they have health care? Let's talk about do they get a seat at the table to determine what adequate personal protective equipment is? The answer to that in too many cases is, no, they're disposable. Again, that disproportionately impacts people of color. Again, the action is not, to us, about one thing.

**After that first one that your members participated in, in the park, did you have any kind of debriefing afterwards? Did people talk about the experience?**

We did with some folks who attended. We didn't do it on a large enough scale, to be honest. But I think the thing that people were...I don't know if *shocked* is the right word because I just think

it's us falling into a false narrative...is that it was so peaceful. If you go look at the news coverage from that action in particular, you will see Fox News talk about how peaceful it was and what a surprise that was. But if you were there, if you participated, you'll notice that the police were not welcome or invited to the event, so there were no tensions that were raised. The police stood back, which I think was the right thing to do.

**How did that happen? How did you get the police to...?**

Well, I certainly did not do that. That's all Minister Stretch [also known as Vance Sanders] and his team and the folks organizing that.

**And I'm going to talk to them. Do you have any female organizers in the—**

In the union?

**—SEIU—yes—now?**

Yes, the majority of our staff is female. The majority of our executive board and the majority of our staff.

**Wonderful. Can you talk about the different styles? When you came into this, it was probably almost all male and now it's switched. Could you talk about the difference?**

When I first started with the union was January of 2001. Again, I think SEIU is a little bit different than maybe what we think of as traditional labor unions. Our executive director at that time was a woman. Her right-hand person was a woman. Maybe I was lucky that one of my first mentors, who now is my current executive director, is a woman. I don't know if that helped shape my outlook even further as a new person coming in. As you could imagine, if you're a labor leader of a union, you might even have to be hyper-aggressive. My first real boss in the labor movement was a woman; her name is Mary. She's still alive. Grace, who is my current executive director, trained me to be a lead organizer some seventeen, eighteen years ago, and so

now we work together again. SEIU has an international president that's a woman. She took that post in 2008. It's a little bit different in SEIU than some of what we think of as blue-collar union.

**Wonderful. That's good to know. The protests that are going on now, do you see this as a moment or a movement?**

I certainly hope it's a movement. I often worry that things get lost, and people do not stick with it. For probably any sort of uprising or disruption, I bet that there is a majority of folks who are participating that feel for them it's a moment, and it's better that they show up; that they take up physical space; that they put themselves on the line. I think that's very important. I know that there are a lot of folks that are deeply committed to this work. I think as a union, our executive board passed not just a resolution, but said, "We're going to take the next twenty-four months to work on becoming an antiracist organization," so there is a time frame established with it. I hope it's a movement.

I think what we're seeing right now is a lot of performative change. That's where we see this disconnect between Amazon can say, "Black Lives Matter," Hulu can say, "Black Lives Matter," Google, whoever can say that. But the question is—okay, so that's better than not saying. Or we could paint "Black Lives Matter" right in front of Donald Trump, and that feels really good for people, and I'm not taking away the significance of that. But then the question is, if I'm Amazon, for example, and I'm keeping people in poverty wages; I'm not providing people with health care; I'm not providing promotional opportunities for people, I'm still engaging in systemic racism no matter what flag I put on it. Well, the same thing. I think there's disconnect.

Yes, I do think it's a movement. I think we just have to be very diligent and keep pushing because right now we're forcing people to pick between their livelihoods and their lives and not providing them with health care or PPE or a living wage. You could post "Black Lives Matter"

all you want, but to me they're looking away. Even though it's not directly related to the Black Lives Matter movement, what we see going on with the football team in Washington that's not because of—definitely fans and organizations and pushing everything; that has been a part of it. But let's be honest. When the corporate sponsors start saying, "We're going to withhold our dollars," then we see some movement. Well, I don't know if that means they actually care about indigenous people.

**But I'm not sure I care.**

Yes.

**You said something that was really important. Your union is taking the next twenty-four months to build this new organization, antiracist. Did you already put out the strategic plan or however you're going to set that up? How are you organizing that?**

SEIU, as an international union, actually came up with a set of principles back in 2016. I can only speak for our local that it was implemented in a disciplined way. Our board basically said, "Here are our principles. Here's what we've got to look at." Then our leadership put in a committee of folks to drive that work and have a level of accountability, is where we're at. That work still has to be done. That was just passed a few weeks ago. By having some folks anchor that work, that's how we're going to see some changes.

**This is a good time for me to just pause to say this. One of the things that we do here at UNLV in our Special Collections and Archives is that we collect manuscripts. Let's say that you put together something back in 2016, and you now have all of that great material packed away in somebody's garage, but you would love to donate it to an archive that would house all of these papers that you've had over the years. If your union ever decides**



**that they're ready to donate some of those materials to the university, we want to house those for you.**

Okay, that's awesome.

**The other thing, before I get back to my next question, a person named Aaron Mayes is going to call you over the next couple of weeks. He works in the department here where I work. He is going to take a professional photograph of everyone who is interviewed for our protest project. He's going to be calling you. His name is Aaron Mayes.**

Okay, got it.

**Good. I love that you are studying about the civil rights movement, Black Power movement. Do you think those movements went far enough? What we are facing today...**

Yes. I'm reading this morning and I stopped reading the chapter of the book I referenced earlier. Towards the end of his life, Dr. King, who a lot of people like to whitewash and sanitize, was alone. He had lost supporters from the Southern Christian Leadership Council. He had lost a lot of his allies in the labor movement. He had lost a lot of his support among White liberals, among politicians. And Malcolm X had been saying this the whole time; that they're using you, brother. Right? That they are using you as long as you play within their rules. I think we need Martins and Malcolms, right? Dr. Cone talks about how Malcolm X was betrayed by the Black people he loved so much, and Dr. King was betrayed by the White people he loved so much. Towards the end of Dr. King's life, he started to say, "Everybody can see that segregation was evil; everybody could see dogs being unleashed upon children was evil." But then as he started to think about the poor people's campaign and he thought about systemic racism, poverty and the war economy, the conditions that lead to these evils...that's where he lost a lot of support. It's easy for me to now say, as a White man with decades past, that it didn't go far enough because,

again, Dr. King's basic premise was that if folks—again, I know he's not representative of the entire civil rights movement, so I don't want to do that—but he thought that if segregation were to come to an end, then folks would have a sense of pride all across the country. But then he went to Los Angeles and walked, and nobody ever heard of him. And then he went to the ghettos in the North, like Malcolm was organizing in, and he saw, okay, so they don't have segregation, but this is almost worse, the housing and discrimination. That is part of your story that inspired me a lot to think about as well.

So, no, it didn't go far enough. Again, I don't want to just keep quoting King and Malcolm, but Malcolm said, "Man, for hundreds of years of slavery, you're talking about the payback for that is to sit at a counter and drink a cup of coffee?" Like, come on. No, it didn't go far enough. No, we didn't go far enough. I mean, it really does... There are some days... I remember when Ahmaud Arbery was gunned down and lynched. A day or two after that—this was before George Floyd—I was working from home, and I was sitting in my backyard. I got done with a meeting at eight o'clock at night. I was just crying because I felt like, man, I've spent my entire adult life fighting. Sometimes it does feel like, does it really matter? It's painful. Then George Floyd has his life extinguished right before our eyes. Those cops knew it was getting videotaped. They didn't care. I think there are moments where you're like, man, does what I'm doing really matter? Does organizing matter? Is it enough?

No, I don't think the civil rights went far enough. I think Dr. King and others had a vision for what it would become, but I think when it began to talk about real equality that's when White people got uncomfortable because it costs something. In our world of union organizing that's one of the things we talk about a lot. It's easy to take a position or a stand. It's a question of "when does it cost you something" that it matters. What are you investing in? Because that's the only

way you're going to see change. That's why people on the left and right get so upset about Nancy Pelosi wearing a kente cloth and kneeling down. Some people might like that, but I know a lot of people in my circles were pretty offended by that. Definitely conservative folks get all up in arms about that for different reasons. It's because it's performative. But you're still benefitting from that system. I think that's the thing we've got to get folks to struggle through is how am I benefitting from this system? If I'm benefitting from this system, and I can't even acknowledge that, then do not dare say, "I think you're my equal, Claytee." I better not dare. I better not dare say, "I love you." I better not dare say, "I care about you." Again, a lot of my thinking has evolved through liberation theology and a lot of...you know.

**I love having this thinking with my first online interview for this project, so I really appreciate this. As you have been thinking and reading and studying, what has struck you about systemic racism? Which part of it stands out for you? Are we talking about banking, schools, health care, housing? What stands out to you? Jobs? Environment?**

I think as people experience it, all those things are connected to one another. The most unsettling or disturbing part is that people don't recognize how the execution of George Floyd is tied to housing, banking, redlining, economic opportunity, drug policies, criminal justice, educational system. I think that's been the most troubling for me is that people don't even connect those dots. I've heard plenty of people imply that maybe George Floyd shouldn't have been there; maybe he should have been following the rules; maybe he shouldn't have put himself in that situation. Candace Owens, who is the prominent conservative commentator, says, "We shouldn't be lifting up these thugs and criminals as heroes to the Black community." I think the most troubling part is that all those things are connected, and that people aren't even willing to even recognize it. I think that goes for all us. That's a process that all of us have to go through.

I remember in 2015, one of my closest friends, this guy named Andrew Chang, who is very well-educated, very thoughtful young man, tried to explain to me how I was a racist. This was only five years ago. I couldn't hear exactly what he was trying to say, and maybe that's because he didn't have the language for it, maybe that's because I was unwilling to hear him at that moment. But what he was trying to say is that even if you're working for social and economic justice, you are caught up in this system that is racist, and how do you fight that—every step of the way—if you're really down for equality? How do you commit yourself to fighting to taking that apart, dismantling that? These are big questions. These are very big questions for people to wrestle with.

**Yes. Thinking about that cycle that you were just talking about, when I talk about it, I just spew all of them out onto the table. Where does a community start?**

Could you say that again? Where does a community start?

**If here in Las Vegas everybody is talking about police brutality, but I want to get to all of the other items that you just named, do we start with banking; do we start with education?**

**How do you get your arms around all of this to put it on a table someplace in the state legislature or someplace to start it?**

I mean I don't feel that I'm qualified to answer that question.

**No one. I'm not sure that we are, period.**

Yes. Again, to me, the police brutality is the minimum because if I don't have the right to live, then I don't have the right to anything else. For me personally, I've been trying to listen to folks in the Black community about where they want to go because that's essentially what Black power is, the ability to say, "This is what my relationship is going to be with White people," but as equals. Definitely in my world as a labor organizer, for me it definitely is economic based and

job based because, again, to bring back up the coronavirus, these folks working in restaurants, these folks working in the service economy, these folks working at Amazon warehouses—again, hashtag Black Lives Matter on Amazon or McDonald’s; that’s just public relations. Failure to provide people with adequate personal protective gear, with hazard pay or hero pay, as we call it; that’s the way you’re going to start to get justice, is when people start to have economic growth as well.

**I ask that question because I think it should start with economics and education, and I think everything else could spiral up from there.**

Well, because if I don’t view you as my equal, then I have no problem economically exploiting you, right?

**Yes.**

Again, I can’t imagine saying to somebody that an hour’s worth of your life is worth less than \$15 an hour. I can’t imagine saying to somebody, “You work for me forty-plus hours a week, but I’m not going to make sure you have healthcare coverage in the middle of a pandemic.” If you’re telling people Black Lives Matter, if Amazon, they could do that, cut into their profit margins and they’d be okay. Maybe have three yachts instead of six.

**Yes, exactly.**

They’ve got to sell one of those homes, yes.

**Yes. How has your conversation about racism changed since the murder of George Floyd?**

My best man from my wedding called me a couple of weeks ago. I got married in 2001. He said, “Do you remember how we would talk about this stuff and nobody cared?” We were on the fringe of the fringe. His brother, Hector, actually—he’s Mexican, Mexican American—was pulled over by the San Diego Police Department for a traffic violation and shot in the back at

least a dozen times. But back then, even though there was a whole series—I was living in San Diego at the time—of police gunning down homeless folks, people with mental health issues, pulling people over, this is different. This is different because of social media, I think because of young people’s unwillingness to accept the way things are, and I just think the sheer inhumanity of it. Whether or not people are willing to fully admit that systemic racism is a thing, because there’s plenty of people who are struggling to acknowledge that, everybody—Black, White, Brown—can all acknowledge—conservative, liberal, progressive—that there is a problem. Again, I’m forty-three years old. I don’t think I’ve witnessed that. This is different. I forget what the original question was. I think everyone is talking about it.

**Yes. How has your conversation changed? Your answer was just perfect. You have friends of all cultures. Are you finding them willing to talk more now than ever before about various cultures, about race, about all of this that’s going on?**

Again, I think the moment we’re living in right now has given people permission to do that in a way that I haven’t seen. Yes, in a way that I haven’t seen, yes.

**Talk about when you first saw the tape for the first time. What did that do for you; to you? What did you feel?**

Like I said earlier, I was already mourning over what happened in Georgia. Georgia, right?

That’s where Ahmaud Arbery…?

**I think it was.**

I think with any of those videos, there’s always a part of me that says, “Don’t watch this,” but then there’s a part of me that says, “Don’t look away.” I watched it. Maybe Child Protective Services is going to come to me for this. We represent Clark County CPS workers. I showed it to my teen-age children because I wanted them to see it. Not to glorify it. Not for the shock value.

But I wanted them to see it and see how it's not just the guy with his knee on George's neck, it's the complicity of everyone around. And so the question I posed to them, and I think it's a hard question, is: If you were there what would you do? I think in retrospect most people would now say, "Oh, I would have done something." But my experience as a union organizer, as someone who has challenged people to take risks, the truth is, no, you wouldn't. Most likely you would've just sat there and done nothing. I think that's the most heartbreaking part.

**Yes. But at least somebody took the photographs.**

Yes. The fact that they documented it has caused this awakening on a global scale. Again, I'm not diminishing that. You asked the question about what I was thinking with the video. I wanted to show it to my kids because I wanted them to see not only the direct evil, but the fact that there were other officers holding him down; the fact that another officer was there telling people to back up, defending him. That is for me... That one of them didn't have the training or the insight or the humanity to say, "Go. Okay, we've got him cuffed. We've got to back off." Again, but that's the invisible system that we can't see, right? That's just so common. Officers have a hard job, no doubt about that.

**Oh yes, oh yes.**

But why are they there in the first place? Why are they dealing with that situation? Why are they escalating?

We did a strike last April for fast food workers, and there was a Wendy's in Henderson where all the workers walked out. My daughter, my youngest was three years old at that time. The manager locked two of the remaining employees in the back, wouldn't let them out. Everybody else walked off the job. We had a big rally. We blocked the drive-through, which was illegal, so Henderson PD came. We had a staff person, who is a dark-skinned African woman.

She was from Africa. She had a heavy accent. She was an attorney. She was our attorney on the site, so far more educated than I am. One of the officers started yelling at her, saying, “What law school did you go to? How don’t you know that this is illegal? What are you doing here?”

I was caught up in the moment because we were leading these chants and these rallies and everything, so I was already in an elevated state; I’ll admit that. I walked between them, and I looked at that officer and I said, “Are we under arrest?” He said, “No.” I said, “Well then, I’m not going to sit here and listen to a lecture from you.” He was like, “Uh, you guys need to...” He starts yelling. I was like, “Why are you escalating the situation?” And he was like, “Why are you escalating the situation?” I said, “Because I’m mad because it’s a hundred degrees out here and these folks are demonstrating for better jobs, and you’re coming here and disrespecting my coworker.”

I remember my boss, Grace, she was our executive director, was in my car with my children, and she wanted to jump out of the car, but luckily someone in the car said to her, “You should probably stay right here.” Because she’s a Filipina and this officer was White. Another officer on the scene was White. More White officers were coming.

But if I didn’t look like I looked, what would have happened to me? What if I would have been a dark-skinned man? If I would have had an accent or a dark skin? We all know what would have happened to me. But because I look like I do...And this is what I think White people need to recognize. I could say that to this officer. Now, I admit I was heated, I was aggravated, and I wasn’t going to put up with any of his bullshit. I got to walk away that day and go to the next protest with Senator Kamala Harris down the street. But that situation would have gone a lot differently, and I wouldn’t have been in a position to interrupt and disrupt that officer. Because I



could see what he was doing. He was picking on the woman with the darkest skin who was right there, and he was starting a confrontation.

**You alluded to another demonstration with Kamala Harris. Tell me a bit about that.**

That was last year. She was running for president of the United States. She joined us on a strike line at McDonalds on, I think, Flamingo and Eastern. Workers had been fighting for \$15 an hour and a union. It was in front of a McDonalds. I think that was the first time she revealed that when she was in school, she was working at McDonalds to help pay the bills, and she did the fries. She was marching with our members and fast-food workers who were trying to get a union. That struggle is still going on today. I've got a picture I can email you of that march.

**Please. I want to end with two questions. I want you to tell me if truth and reconciliation will ever come to the United States.**

I pray it will. I don't know. I think there is such a disconnect, and it's so easy for folks, like my father or my uncles back east, to say, "I never owned slaves; I've got a Black friend; that was hundreds of years ago." I pray it does. I hope it comes about. Again, that was one of the things when Dr. King said, "Losing support." I would have to go check a reference. He put a dollar amount on it back then, in the late Sixties. I'm not sure. But I will say it is significant that presidential candidates in the Democratic Party were talking about reparations. I think that's significant because, again, I don't remember that ever being...I have a very short history, forty-three years, but I don't remember that being talked about in a serious way, as a mainstream idea in my lifetime. Maybe it is possible. But I think there was this belief that people of a certain generation who held those beliefs, who benefitted from those beliefs would die off. What I worry about is that there's a new generation of folks who are getting radicalized by the current president of the United States, by right-wing media—I'm not going to even call them media—

right-wing entertainment networks. I say that only because—I can't remember if it was Tom Brokaw or Ted Koppel or somebody—even Sean Hannity admitted he's not a reporter. He said it flat out. He's an entertainer. He plays a character equal to the character that Stephen Colbert played on Comedy Central. But they are whipping up...I don't think it is just people of a certain age. I think you're seeing some young people fall into that. Now, I'm hopeful that the youth just have a different world view and a different outlook. I don't know. That's a longwinded answer to say I don't know.

**I'm going to—**

Because, Claytee, it's got to cost something. There is going to be a price.

**Yes. So repartitions would cost something, yes.**

Yes, yes.

**I really, really appreciate this so very much.**

I'm sorry if it wasn't very smooth or—

**No, this is perfect. This is perfect. It's the way an interview is supposed to go. I really, really appreciate this so much.**

I appreciate you. Thank you.

**[End of recorded interview]**