

UOH002731_Howell Oral History Project
Detroit, MI

Sharon “Shea” Howell

Interviewed by
Ciera Casteel
Nov. 16, 2018
Detroit, MI

As part of the Oral History Class in the School of Information Sciences
Kim Schroeder, Instructor
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Brief Biography: Shea Howell has been an activist in Detroit since the early 1970s. Born in Pennsylvania she came to Detroit because of Angela Davis and stayed because the city gave her hope for a revolution. Since then, she has been involved in a wide variety of social movements and coalitions, including but not limited to: the National Organization for an American Revolution, Detroiters for Dignity, Save Our Sons and Daughters, Affirmations, Green Gatherings, the Detroit Women’s Coffeehouse, the Michigan Roundtable, the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership, and Detroit Summer. She has been teaching at Oakland University in the communications department since 1979 and frequently writes in a variety of publications including: *Riverwise Magazine*, *Between the Lines*, and in *Critical Sociology*.

Interviewer: Ciera Casteel

Abstract: In this interview Shea Howell discusses her history of activism in the city of Detroit, beginning with her involvement with the National Organization for an American Revolution. She goes on to discuss her involvement with well-known LGBTQ organizations in Metro Detroit such as Affirmations in addition to her time fighting with organizations for racial equity. She also discusses her response to the emergency management of Michigan and the eventual reinvestment in the city of Detroit at the time of the interview, as well as its effects on those who call the city home. Howell also explains her motivation behind forming the urban renewal and youth project, Detroit Summer, and its connection to the linkages between violence against the Earth and violence against people. Because she is also a professor at Oakland University, she speaks to the balance she maintains between her activism and her life as an academic. Finally, Howell gives her thoughts on the election of Donald Trump and what gives her hope for the future.

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Transcript of interview conducted Nov. 16, 2018 with:
Sharon “Shea” Howell in Detroit, MI
By: Ciera Casteel

Casteel: This is Ciera Casteel interviewing Shea Howell at Wayne State University.
Today’s date is November 16, 2018.

Howell: It’s very cold.

Casteel: (laughing) Yes. Okay, to start off Shea, why don’t you just give us the
basic background of where you were born?

Howell: Okay, I was born in South Greensburg, Pennsylvania. Umm and lived a
half a block from where my grandfather was born.

Casteel: Oh, and uh what brought you to Detroit?

Howell: Well usually I say Angela Davis.

Casteel: Yeah?

Howell: I was part of something called the National Alliance Against Racist and
Political Repression, which Angela Davis founded umm shortly after she got out of
prison, was uhh—you know, found not guilty of murder.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: and umm- anyway that organization held a convention in Detroit and I
came to Detroit for that convention and Coleman Young, John Conyers, Erma
Henderson, Charles Diggs, all these soon to be or current elected officials greeted
Angela Davis onstage at some big church up Woodward Ave which I’ve now
forgotten.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Welcomed her to the city and essentially said we got your back here, you are always safe here. And I thought any city that had the guts to say that to Angela Davis was a terrific place.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: So, I wanted to come to Detroit because you felt like the revolution as gonna happen maybe in a week. And umm I was very lucky because George Ziegelmuller ran the Wayne State debate team, and he offered me an assistantship for the debate team so that it made it financially possible for me to come to Detroit.

Casteel: Oh great, yeah

Howell: So I came to Detroit on a graduate assistantship but I did it because of Angela Davis and what I saw happening in the city.

Casteel: And what year was that? Do you remember?

Howell: That's a really good question; somewhere around '72 '73 something like that. It was the early 70s.

Casteel: And how old would you have been back then?

Howell: 25-24-25? Somewhere in there.

Casteel: Yeah. Okay, so your legal name is Sharon

Howell: Mhmm

Casteel: How and when did you start going by Shea?

Howell: In umm my first year of college the woman across the hall from me was named Sharon Powell.

Casteel: Mmmm

Howell: and we kept getting confused by the - because in those days people couldn't just go in and out of dorms, everything- anyway and neither of us wanted to change our name. So we agreed to a name that either of us could live with

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: and we drew straws and I lost. So that's how I became Shea. You know I didn't pick it but it just that was-

Casteel: (laughing) Yeah, just happened, luck of the draw

Howell: Exactly (laughing)

Casteel: So, umm by doing a little research I found out that shortly after moving to

Detroit you joined a meeting for the National Organization for an American Revolution.

Howell: Mhmm

Casteel: What drew you to this group and what do you remember about your experience in this organization as its first white member?

Howell: Well it wasn't the National Organization yet.

Casteel: Okay

Howell: When I ran into it it was still The Advocators

Casteel: Okay

Howell: and there were a series of local groups that were affiliated but each one had a local identity

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: and ours was the Advocators and I met, in my graduate class there was a woman named Pat Coleman, who – African American woman – who would say the most interesting things and I - so we became friends and she invited me to what was - at the first level of entry into that organization were public conversations around current events

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: and those happened, I think monthly. So I started going to those and then after a few months if people thought you were a serious person they would- you got invited to study groups

Casteel: Okay

Howell: So in the study groups there were like three levels, so I got through all three of those levels and then the question was whether or not I would be invited into the organization which would have been the typical process if I were African American.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: But since I wasn't that was like a big deal.

Casteel: Right

Howell: But umm all along this organization saw itself as giving leadership to the whole country, not just in terms of not only African Americans.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: And so umm, they decided at some point they'd have to let in other kinds

of folk. And here I was so there- that's pretty much why it happened

Casteel: (laughing) yeah

Howell: It was a wonderful experience. Uhh I learned so much and think that was such a gift. And we were Advocators for maybe two or three years before we created the National Organization.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: So I was part of that creation.

Casteel: Oh, that's amazing

Howell: We held a founding convention, which I think was at St. Basil's in Lake Orion which no longer exists because the Lake Orion plant took all of that land, but umm that was the founding convention. I'm pretty sure the founding was here in Detroit, and people from Philadelphia, Muskegon, umm I don't think Newark was in yet, but Kentucky, and the Bay area, Syracuse, maybe Seattle anyway there were a bunch of us-

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: -who were all part of the founding. And each of those local organizations then abandoned their local name and became NOAR.

Casteel: Mhmm. Umm you mentioned the study groups, what kind of things would you study in the study groups?

Howell: Well the first thing you studied, was *Revolution and Evolution in the 20th Century* and after that study group, if you made it through that and we did a chapter a week.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: So if you made it through that one- umm then there were a series of internal documents. One was called "The Ideology of the Circle," which was a strategy of how to connect these local organizing efforts in each city together

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: that was – and what our basic ideology was. Which was rooted in the notion that the fundamental contradiction in the United States is the contradiction between economic and technological overdevelopment and political and social underdevelopment. So that was sort of the key idea.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: And there was another paper that was widely circulated and reprinted called-umm "Commitment is Key" or "Organization Means Commitment" depending on which version you see. (pause while interviewer writes) And then we read the *Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party* (pause while interviewer

read the *manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party*. (pause while interviewer writes) And I don't know, I think Kenny Snodgrass probably has the best collection of all of those documents.

Casteel: Alright. And did you identify this as your first experience with political and social activism?

Howell: Oh no, by then I thought I was a seasoned activist.

Casteel: (laughing) Yeah

Howell: (laughing) I mean I thought I knew quite a bit by then. I mean I'd been active in some ways since I was 6, so

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: -you know. I felt pretty- what I found with Jimmy and Grace was they seemed to me the most mature, and thoughtful, and real people talking about Americans.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: You know, because I'd been flirting with the Communist Party with Angela Davis. I mean obviously I- you know I didn't realize it at the time, her organization was a recruiting front for the CP.

Casteel: Mmm

Howell: You know that's what they did, they did these mass formations and but umm anyway, I found the CP not attractive. They were- I mean I have a lot of respect for the Communist Party don't get me wrong, but umm they felt old, and tired -

Casteel: a little. Yeah, yeah.

Howell: -and out of sync with where the country was. In a more charitable sense I sometimes say one of the wonderful things about that convention that I went to in uhh - with the National Alliance was it was the first time I'd walked into a room- I'd been active at least a decade, it was the first time I walked into a room where everybody had grey hair.

Casteel: (Laughing)

Howell: And I thought, "wow people do this for a lifetime after all". You know because it was such a young-

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: -movement, and I- So.

Casteel: (laughing) Yeah

Casteel: Umm, you said Jimmy and Grace.

Howell: Mhmm

Casteel: You're referencing the Boggs?

Howell: Yeah, Jimmy and Grace Boggs right.

Casteel: Okay. And, thinking back to the 80s and 90s in Detroit and the LGBT social scenes, how have these- what are your memories of those areas of uhh Detroit and how have these in the 2000s?

Howell: Well you've probably read Tim Retzloff's book on uhh the LGBT community in Detroit

Casteel: I haven't (laughs)

Howell: Oh well go get it, cuz he'll really tell you everything

Casteel: (laughs) Yeah.

Howell: Tim – Tim Retzloff.

Casteel: Tim

Howell: It's uhh Yale University

Casteel: He did come talk to us now that you mention that. Yep, Tim did. Yep.

Howell: Oh good, he's a terrific guy. But he's got a book out, his dissertation was on this, but in the late 70s early 80s almost all of gay life happened in the bars

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: That's just the way it was and there were a lot of bars around. Some better than others. I mean for lesbians the underground, and the rainbow, the railroad crossing which then became the rainbow room or something like that I've lost track. Umm but that's what most of the social life happened in, in the bar scene. That was probably true from after World War II probably right up until the early 80s I would think. But in the early 80s I was part of a group that in order to counter the bar scene actually started the Detroit Women's Coffeehouse. And you should talk to Ann Perault about that

Casteel: Ann Perault

Howell: because Ann was the founder really. Ann and Lizette Chevalier but Lizette isn't here anymore. She's in Illinois.

Casteel: Is the Coffeehouse still around, I tried to look

Howell: No but it...

Casteel: Yeah, I tried to look at it

Howell: was the longest running coffeehouse in the United States.

Casteel: Wow

Howell: Umm yeah we - we did pretty well, but you know once – its reason for being was there was no place particularly where lesbians could go and be out in public

Casteel: Yeah, that wasn't a bar

Howell: Right, unless it was a bar. And this umm- so by I guess I don't know when did we stop somewhere in the 200s

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: umm but there wasn't the same need. And the other things was – I don't know how familiar you are with the Women's Music Scene but that was in the 80s and 90s very powerful

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: but it- one of the main institutional forces behind it, the Michigan Women's Music Festival, could not make the transition to include people who identify as trans

Casteel: Hmm

Howell: And that became a very difficult and sad experience. That meant that the whole Women's Music Scene that had been a unifying force was becoming a fracturing force

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: So both because people could go other places, because there was this sort of political fracturing. And frankly our lives had gotten very complicated. Ann had started Avalon Bakery

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: And by that point had had at least one child, maybe two and you know I was very involved with Detroit Summer and

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: Anyway. So and our audiences had gone down from you know 150 down to 30.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: So it just didn't seem like the need was there anymore, so we quit

Howell: So it just didn't seem like the need was there anymore, so we quit.

Casteel: Where was it located?

Howell: Well it moved but most of its life was in the basement of the unitarian church.

Casteel: Okay.

Howell: Second Saturday of every month for about 22 years.

Casteel: Wow

Howell: Except for august when we all went to the Michigan Music Festival

Casteel: (chuckles) So since you have been here in Detroit, you have been witness to the disinvestment and abandonment of much of the city and have also seen big money and development return to the city. You were a vocal opponent to the emergency management in Michigan. As someone who has been active in the city as well as a resident, what are your thoughts and concerns about the directions of the growth in 2018?

Howell: Well I've written a lot about it and still writing a lot about it. Umm I think these guys are playing with fire.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: I think it is very dangerous, and they're trying to respond to that danger by creating a more militarized city but if they know anything about history at all they know that won't work.

Casteel: Right

Howell: But, so I'm very worried about the future uhh just in terms of an explosion. And I think I don't know how many people you talk to but uhh the ruthlessness of this kind of development is bound to create a reaction

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: And the only- I'm convinced the only reason we haven't had a rebellion since the emergency management is because there have been so many people in the community level trying to chill people out.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Particularly young people. But that's clearly not a sustainable strategy in that none of these folks seem to have institutional support for that

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: So that's very worrisome. Umm I think the investment in the 7.2 miles. At the expense of the neighborhood is a continuing problem which fuels this anger.

Umm there's a lot written and a lot analyzed about the 7.2 miles but umm the intransigence of the mayor to deal with water shutoffs, to deal with foreclosures, umm to deal the basic repairs of the city, the fact that he used all of federal HUD money that should have gone to people in their homes, to tear down other abandoned homes is horrific. His streetlights are ugly, they don't work hardly. And umm you know I don't know what your neighborhood is like but in mine – I have now – it took us five year to get somebody to fix our sewer line which they fixed for two month and it is now back doing the very same thing. You know in the middle of the street –

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: -I'm a half a block off the Lodge Freeway and we've got a giant pool of water. And I was just two days ago joking with my neighbor we have our own number – our own repair number –

Casteel: Ohh

Howell: And every time you call the city someone says, "oh call back after five you'll get to a supervisor" and you call back after five the supervisor says, "oh I don't handle that call back during the day." (chuckles) So, no one will take responsibility

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: So that to me is the epitome of what is happening in the neighborhoods

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: That nobody in the Downtown area is taking responsibility for the improvement of life in the city, nor are they thinking about the extraordinary creativity, and energy, and action that's happening at the neighborhood level.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: You know these are like two parallel universes.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: And umm that's destructive and its especially destructive because so much of the energy of people is to offer really creative solutions to what kind of city we could be. So I am – I have nothing good to say about the Mayor or certainly Dan Gilbert who just sold the casinos for a billion dollars

Casteel: Yep

Howell: And then bought a high tech thing. When I speak around the country about emergency management before emergency management, Dan Gilbert owned 30 some buildings, many of which he got very cheaply. After emergency management he owned 101. And there was no public discussion of any of that, many of them with tax breaks. And the current set of buildings that he purchased with the tax breaks

breaks -

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: were based on laws he helped create, all during the emergency management process. State laws he helped create. But if you talk to people at the state they refer to those laws as “oh the Gilbert bills”

Casteel: Mmm

Howell: So, umm there is a level of manipulation and

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Dishonesty that I just find personally offensive (chuckles) and publicly offensive.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: That’s why, it’s umm (pause) so that’s what I think about that. I think that there has been no serious investment back in the neighborhoods. And I live not very far from the Live 6 neighborhood area-

Casteel: mmm

Howell: -which is not living up to its potential, let’s say. You know that’s one of the big areas that the mayor touts having redone. I have spent a lot of time on the East Side where I see no measurable change from any of this other than the Boggs Center is close to the River, so we are seeing the pressures coming from Eastern Market and up-

Casteel: Yep

Howell: So it’s obvious gentrification is happening. It’s not obvious that people are trying to make - umm a city that protects the people who have always lived there

Casteel: Right

Howell: So that’s what I think in a nut shell, I mean it’s a longer story but I’ve written a lot about that -these issues though so...

Casteel: Yeah

20:36

Casteel: You were also previously on the executive board of Affirmations and also worked with the Triangle Foundation. How did you get involved with these organizations and what changes do you feel they brought to Metro Detroit?

Howell: Umm- in 1992/3 was right when we started Detroit Summer, well I had known Jan Stevenson, shortly after she started Affirmations, and I’m sure you’ve – anyway she’s terrific.

Casteel: Mhmm

Casteel: Mmmmm

Howell: And it was something like '92 or '93 there was a right wing initiative that was modeled after what was I think then Proposition 2 in Colorado.

Casteel: Mmm

Howell: Essentially this was one of the early right wing efforts to limit the civil rights of gay and lesbian people by making it illegal to organization based on gender. Yeah, it was pretty nasty. It passed in Colorado. And so there was a series of these happening around the country and we understood that there was a ballot initiative in Detroit, or not in Detroit in Michigan -

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: - they were going around trying to get signatures. So rather than wait for that to happen we created something called the Campaign for Human Dignity and I co-chaired that with a guy named John Burchett and we had an action committee. Jan was a part of it, the Triangle Foundation as a part of it. It was a pretty good size coalition. There were maybe 15 or 20 of us that formed the heart of it, we did some fundraising we did some polling. We did a huge - it was the year that *Philadelphia* came out about AIDS -

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: I can't remember who was - you know, it was a famous movie. Anyway we did a big premier, it was in January. And umm that was a fundraiser for the campaign and we went around and mostly tried to get organizations of all kinds to say they affirmed the right of gay people to organize.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: You know, (Chuckles) turns out that wasn't as easy as you might think. But we did that we had hundreds of organizations and churches and we created enough energy that actually the whole right wing effort failed at that point. But that's - it's through that I worked on a daily basis with people from Affirmations and people with the Triangle Foundation

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: and I imagine you've talked to Rick Robinson who's teaching queer studies here at Wayne [he is actually currently at the University of Michigan Dearborn] now I think?

Casteel: I don't know about that

Howell: Rick Robinson, oh he's a terrific, he used to be Mel Ravitz's chief of staff. He's an older guy, uhh Richard Robinson. I think he's teaching at Wayne. He lives right here in the neighborhood.

Casteel: Okay, yeah we'll have to look into him.

Howell: Anyway, Rick pulled together what he thought of as the sort of the leadership of the community to umm meet weekly because there were all these organizational tensions, and people had done you know nasty things to each other. So I worked very closely with Jan*, Jeff*, our campaign, Cornelius Wilson - have you talked with him?

*Meaning Jan Stevenson of Affirmations and Jeff Montgomery of Triangle Foundation

Casteel: I don't know, I'll have to double check on that.

Howell: Corn started uhh Black Men Loving Men, I can't remember the name of it but umm anyway he's an African American guy and then who identifies as same sex partners and umm *Kick Magazine* I don't know if he had started *Kick* yet. Curtis Lis-Lipscomb. So anyway, a bunch of us would meet together and a small group meet regularly weekly to try to strategize and keep away the right wing.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: and we were very successful, it was a really successful effort but out of that - it was also an exhausting effort and Jan shortly - somewhere in there decided she wanted to retire from Affirmations

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: And so some of us joined the board in order to be able to help her be able to feel comfortable leaving

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: So I did that, and I was there for maybe one or two terms I can't remember. But I - as to what Affirmations contributed, it's probably saved a lot of lives it just has.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: No question. It's done tremendous work around creating a consciousness of queer life in the city. And I don't know if Jan told in the early days of affirmations, they would apply for grants from The United Way and their grant applications would be returned to sender, unopened. Yeah, people wouldn't open up - wouldn't look at - I meant that was how crazy people were about gay and lesbian stuff

Casteel: Wow

Howell: Umm but Jan persisted

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: And then they got the wonderful guy, Carr, Vincent Carr, from the uhh United Way. African American man, the Carr center is named after him Downtown

Casteel: Oh yes

Casteel: Oh yep

Howell: anyway he shifted that uhh, but in the meantime because of the crisis with AIDS, they had been able to get some AIDS funding, so that helped but mostly Affirmations ran on donations from people which Jan was terrific at garnering.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Umm so I was there for a couple of terms and then left. And they too had a very difficult time making the transition to include trans folk. But they've persisted and are still there and umm the Triangle Foundation is now Mission Equality. Or Michigan Equality, they've shifted their name. Jeff used to be, in some ways the only gay person in Michigan. He was -

Casteel: (laughs)

Howell: -constantly out and clear and very progressive. You know he had his demons as everyone does I suppose, but he could be counted on to say the right thing in the most progressive humane open way. And umm – he did a tremendous amount to create gay visibility in the city

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: in a positive sense. You know Jan was – Affirmations is much more Oakland County identified and I think the racial tensions within in the gay community were not helped by some of that

Casteel: Mmmm

Howell: and that was really run by the white male board that refused to put Affirmations in Detroit

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Which was a big mistake. But Triangle has always been in Detroit.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: But together – I think both of those organizations were a major part of what shifted public consciousness around being queer in the country

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: I think Affirmations is maybe the second or third largest community center in the nation.

Casteel: Wow

Howell: Yeah, it's very – it's not a small thing.

Casteel: Yeah, I didn't know that.

Howell: I don't know if it still is but certainly for a time it was. When I was on the board it was. And it was a public community center and is a public community center – its – there – anyway so that uhh I think they both have been primarily positive.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: I think both leaderships were concerned for racial justice

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: But not really able to make that a reality. Some of the leadership of Affirmations after I was gone and Jan – but I know they were picketed a time or two by African American colleagues because of their hiring policy or their internal discrimination

Casteel: Hmm

Howell: I mean those are – they're contentious organizations primarily around race

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: But they have I think if you looked at the institutional record they have definitely supported umm Hotter than July! Jeff particularly was a voice in the city for racial equity. As was Rick Robinson, or is Rick Robinson whose long been on the board of Triangle and I don't know I haven't followed Michigan Equity in a long time so I have no idea whose still in that.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: I saw Curtis not too long ago though so I know Lis – he did a thing at MOCAD [Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit] on umm Sonic Rebellion

Casteel: Mmmm

Howell: Which I participated in, it was fun.

Casteel: Is that still up there or no?

Howell: No it was during the – it was part of the '67 exhibit period

Casteel: Oh okay, yeah

30:49

Casteel: What services or resource do wish young LGBTQ individuals have access to, and what services or resources were missing when you first came out?

Howell: Well there weren't any (Laughs)

Casteel: (Laughs) Yeah

Howell: That was pretty easy, Nothing, I mean I really think support for LGBTQ youth has only happened since the 90s

youth has only happened since the 90s.

Casteel: Mmm

Howell: Early 90s. I was just talking to someone the other day, I remember sitting in San Francisco the day Bill Clinton won. And I was in a room with all lesbians and we were literally holding our breath to see if he would say the words gay and lesbian. Because they were so toxic. I mean I don't know if you know this but up until probably the mid 2000s, we could not get a single state legislator to add to the Elliott-Larsen language, sexual orientation. You know there is no protection-

Casteel: Hmm

Howell: -in the state still. There's federal protection but there is not state, our state discrimination laws thanks to John Engler, explicitly exclude gay and lesbian people. And we couldn't get a state legislator to do it (chuckles) or even propose it. So anyway I remember being in this room, in it – so it was Clinton's accep- you know when he umm the day he was elected, what do they call that? The not the acceptance speech – but the

Casteel: Inauguration?

Howell: No it was his claiming victory, you know

Casteel: Oh yeah, yeah like the night of

Howell: Thank you everyone. Yeah the night of – the night he was elected umm anyway. He said, “and thanks to gay and lesbian people” and this whole room cheered and people poured out into the streets I mean it was a big deal (laughs) I mean that's how – just to have the words uttered

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: At a national level was terrific , (chuckles) you what I mean it was like celebration

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: So that gives you some idea of the absence of things. I think the Ruth Ellis Center here is wonderful

Casteel: Mmm

Howell: I think it fills a need that I – we certainly saw that need in Detroit Summer. A bunch of the kids in Detroit Summer were queer identified. Although they didn't use that term then

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: But they were or became queer identified as time went on. Umm but there were no explicit services. Affirmations I think started the first youth group in the Tri-county

Casteel: Hmm

Howell: Where kids could come and talk those were essentially peer led, you know there was no great sophistication to it but there was a space, they held a space where kids could come together and share

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: and I think that's terrific

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: And that's different from the Ruth Ellis Center which really started out providing shelter -

Casteel: Mmm

Howell: - for kids who'd been kicked out and umm there certainly isn't enough of that now. And you probably know this things like umm if you're a minor and you go to a public shelter they have to contact your parents because you're a minor

Casteel: Hmmm

Howell: And often you are there because you are running away from your parents

Casteel: right

Howell: So it meant kids were living on the streets, and that's where Ruth Ellis Center really got its arms around kids

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: And they have worked to be able to keep kids in that shelter I think it's – you can be there for two weeks and you don't have to have your parents notified, they've figured out some –

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: - I don't know if they've changed it for everyone in the state but I know they've changed their capacity within the legal system so they're not putting kids at greater risk who seek shelter. But there's very little consciousness I think of the degree statewide or nationally for that matter of the degree to which particularly queer kids in places like Detroit, but Oakland County, Macomb County, if they have no support at home or in their community, it's very hard for them to get support in a meaningful way anywhere else

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Umm and I understand that this current president is attempting to restrict all of those kind of supports even more, (leaf blower can be heard in the background) but even though kids have access to the internet which I think has

background, but even though kids have access to the internet which I think has saved probably a lot of lives, umm being able to meet with other people who have shared your experience is critical

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: and there's not enough of that – there's not money for that . I mean we can name all of the shelters and still have fingers on one hand

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: So I think it's great that kids are coming out earlier and I think probably among the most positive developments of the last probably 20 years have been these gay/straight alliances which have given both gay and straight kids uhh a really meaningful space to talk about identity and I think the gift of the gay movement is it pushes you to what do you value about people?

Casteel: yeah

Howell: As opposed to what do you think about their biology. And I think those are really positive. And that's a real positive direction. And Affirmations have supported those, Triangle supported those. I've worked with some through the Michigan Round Table which is – took a little while to move them toward supporting gay and lesbian stuff but they do now. Quite openly and proudly. (Pause to let interviewer write) Yeah the Round Table for Diversity and Inclusion and for about ten years I worked with teachers through them

37:33

Casteel: Teachers all across the state or just Detroit?

Howell: Detroit, Macomb, Washtenaw, Oakland Counties.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: I did a little work up in Central Michigan but not much

Casteel: Mhmm. As a co-founder of Detroit Summer-

Howell: Mhmm

Casteel: - what led you to form this organization for youth in Detroit?

Howell: Well it's a more complicated story than we usually tell

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: I mean the usual story is umm – Jim and Grace and a bunch of us around - NOAR was sort of fading at that point, umm we had started to work originally against casino gambling

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: with a group called Detroiters for Dignity. and Detroiters for Dignity then

started working with two emerging groups that were umm – dealing with violence in the community. One was SOSAD Save Our Sons and Daughters – SOSAD, yeah you're right, Save Our Sons and Daughters and that was founded by Clem Barfield and that was the mothers who had lost children to gun violence, I think it was 42 kids in one year were killed by gun violence – 86/87 somewhere in there. Umm anyway Grace Boggs, Jimmy Boggs and I were part of SOSAD, making that happen. But Clem was the clear leader what she did was umm call together people who had lost their kids

Casteel: Mmmm

Howell: Because she had lost a son to gun violence and ultimately she decided – or they as a group decided to hold a public memorial. It was Downtown I can't remember might have been in Central Methodist, maybe not, it was a big church about 5000 people showed up for this church service against gun violence and umm a representative from each family walked up and put a rose on the alter in honor of the child lost that year

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: And I don't know if you've ever done any organizing but, to get someone from each family to come at the same time to do something public out of that tragedy, it was remarkable.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: And Clem had a tremendous moral voice in the city. So through Detroiters for Dignity we were working with Clem and SOSAD. And the other one was called WEPROSE We the People Reclaim Our Streets and that was headed up by a woman named Dorothy Garner. And Dorothy's story was that umm she had seen drug dealing in her neighborhood she had been standing on her porch and she had been yelling – you know – saying to kids don't do that . the young drug dealers got upset with her. They started sending hearses to her house to pick up her dead body. So then that really pissed her off.

Casteel: (chuckles) yeah

Howell: And she organized a march against these crack houses. Not against the people she was very clear about this – umm but to disrupt the drug traffic.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: So with WEPROSE, we created every Friday for about 7 or 8 years, we didn't miss. We marched on a drug house in the neighborhood. We walked through the streets, and we created chants, and both of these things - you had the youth violence and you had the anti-drug. Everyplace we went people said, "where are these damn kids, there's no young people, you know where are they?"

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: and some of us said well maybe there's a really good reason you're not

Howell: and some of us said well maybe there's a really good reason you're not gonna walk against a drug house (chuckles)

Casteel: (chuckles) Yeah

Howell: but maybe we should ask young people. So we pulled together a group which included Clem, Dorothy Garner, some of the Detroiters for Dignity, Jimmy and I were working with the Detroit Greens. I think there were 7 of us originally, and we wrote a call asking organizations in the city to meet to talk about this youth crisis.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: and umm- it was Martin Luther King's birthday of 1992, and it was a snowstorm and Grace and I were the only two people to go to the meeting to put up a sign to say – this is pre internet – to say, “don't come here... (chuckles)

Casteel: (laughs) yeah

Howell: - we're gonna try for next week.” So we figured the whole thing would be a bust. We had about 60 organizations show up, for this initial conversation

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: And in that we decided to create a parallel program to umm Mississippi Freedom Summer.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: That's what inspired us. Let's do – first we talked about Detroit Freedom Summer – with the idea that we would invite young people and around the country to come to Detroit and be part of rebuilding the cities. And our theme was that just like the challenge of young people in the generation of the Civil Rights Movement was to go South, the challenge for the generation of young people in the 90s was to rebuild our cities. And umm that was in January. And somewhere in there was Rodney King. With the eruption in LA

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Which helped us tremendously, because suddenly everyone was saying, “oh what's going on in the cities?”

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: So we had about a hundred young people that first year. And uhh that was the June of '92, so within 6 months we had organized the very first Detroit Summer. No money, no staff, no nothing, we just did it.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: and it was a really interesting coalition because it was Bernie Brock from Wayne State came. Umm Agnes Scott from Public Television came in fact some of

our committee meetings were held in her office space up in the old public television. And there were all these radicals and then there were all these community groups, it was a really – it was one of the most diverse coalitions I've ever been in.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: So that's what led to Detroit Summer. So the easy story is it was people who were concerned about the state of youth in the city and the deterioration in the city and instead of seeing young people as the problem how do we say young people actually have the solution -

Casteel: yeah

Howell: - to what kind of city we will become. So Detroit summer became the container for bringing together young people and the problems of the city in this volunteer effort.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: And it was a little more complicated than that story because another thread was the Green Movement.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: Which before it was the Green Party there was something called Green Gatherings and Jimmy and I in particular had been very active in the Green Gatherings. And they were national formations and we had met there a man named Roberto Mendoza who currently lives in Oklahoma and at that time he might have been in California – I don't know where Roberto was then, he travels all over. Anyway Roberto who's a native American man was giving a lot of leadership to the Green Gatherings and his basic line was, "These ideas are too important to be left to white people." That was kind of his basic –

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: And we kind of agreed and said, "Yeah we need to get this with a more urban focus." And so Roberto had thought of this idea of bringing to Detroit for a Summer intensive of some kind

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: And so he had been working with the Greens to help push that notion. And there was inside the Greens a number of people of different ethnicities but among them Starhawk. Who I don't know if you know her or not?

Casteel: (mumbles to indicate no)

Howell: She's a witch. She's a very – she's an amazing activist from the Bay area. A Pagan, she's probably been the person whose identified the new Pagan Movement. If you look up her website she's terrific. Any way Starhawk had been one and Roberto and a guy from – another indigenous person from Wisconsin, a

man named Walt Bresette who has since passed on, and then our colleagues from the Bay Area Margo Adair. This was like a thrust inside these Green Gatherings to push beyond what had been umm- historic environmental perspectives. I don't know if you know any of this history?

Casteel: No

Howell: I'm just now writing about it. Umm the Environmental Movement was almost all white.

Casteel: Mmmm

Howell: And it was almost all wilderness based. So if you look at early stuff from the Sierra Club, or you know the major -

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: World Wildlife Fund, major what we think of as environmental institutions almost, their early propaganda have no people in them. They regard people as the problem (Laughs)

Casteel: (Laughs) Yeah

HOWELL: and you know I sort of get – but there was a moment when uhh- I was in a meeting and African Americans would stand up and say, “We're an endangered species -”

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: (chuckles) “- what's the matter with you, you know you're worried about the cricket, what about us? You know don't we count?”

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: and those were actual debates, those weren't umm – you know cuz people would sort of say, you mess it up you know all this crazy stuff. So in that thrust was this idea that Detroit Summer would also be a vehicle to create umm- a bridge between these white environmental organizations -

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: - and the urban crisis. And I just spoke at the uhh – Black 2 Just Transitions conference on Friday at EMEAC. And I used the example in 1970 you had Earth Day which was almost all white. And right here in U of M, you had the Black Action Movement which closed down the university for nearly 20 days, 18 days. Largest, most successful challenge to U of M anywhere – any time to bring Black studies, more African American teachers – you know all that

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: That's what happened out of that. And there was no cross over, no intersection at all. That's 1970 1990 to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Earth Day

interception at all. That's 1970, 1990 to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Earth Day, SOSAD and Detroit Greens, WEPROSE, planted 10,000 trees in honor of lives lost to hand gun violence between 1970 and 1990.

Casteel: Wow

Howell: Just in Detroit. 10,000.

Casteel: Wow

Howell: And umm we had schools involved, we had parks, we had regular houses, you know people wanted -

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: - all kinds of – and we planted a grove of trees on Belle Isle in a big Earth Day ceremony, it was a wonderful day. In that 20 year period we went from these separate domains, to by 1990 beginning to see that the violence against the Earth and the violence against people were interconnected. And what I spoke about on Saturday was, and then by 2010, that grove of trees had been flattened by Roger Penske in order to have the uhh concrete staging -

Casteel: Yep

Howell: - area for the Grand Prix.

Casteel: Yep

Howell: So that to me speaks to a trajectory of the city that we need to think about. And I think the high point was in 1990 when that became the foundation or what ultimately became the People of Color Environmental Justice Principles

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: It came out in 1993 from somewhere in the South. But it was a recognition that these things which had been separate needed to be brought together, and one of the reasons they hadn't been brought together was racism on the part of the Environmental Movement. Anyway so that's – that's the more complicated part of the founding of Detroit Summer.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: That is was not only to deal with the violence in the city, there was this other thrust. And in fact, tangibly we got the Green Gathering to commit 7,000 dollars to pay our first and only (laughs) our staff person for the summer. We knew we needed some human -

Casteel: (laughs) Yeah

Howell: - to be like responsible. Cuz you know everybody had jobs. Everybody was doing stuff. And we couldn't run a program unless we had somebody that was...

Casteel: Yeah, somebody's gotta know what's going on.

Howell: Somebody's gotta know. So we did. So that's the more complicated story of it. And I think it always maintained that sense of umm a more holistic perspective. It was certainly about addressing urban issues -

Casteel: yeah

Howell: - but with this sense of that cities are part of the ecological landscape as well.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: So.

53:23

Casteel: In addition to Detroit Summer, you're also a co-founder of the Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership and this is a testament to the friendship you've discussed about - uhh with Grace and - Grace Lee and James Boggs.

Howell: Mhmm

Casteel: How did this friendship begin?

Casteel: You've kind of talked about this a little bit.

Howell: Mhmm

Casteel: And then how has the Center been able to carry on their legacy?

Howell: Well you know Grace and Jim they were the uhh I met Jimmy before Grace because he was the - he conducted the study groups along with a couple of other people but

Casteel: Ohh okay, okay

Howell: But he was actually the you know the facilitator

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: although he would've not liked that word

Casteel: (laughs)

Howell: and Umm I thought of grace as his wife, who always offered us lentil soup. You know I didn't know who she was. I mean I knew she was on the books but I didn't know.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Because the - it was very segmented, there was still this kind of

underground mentality and all that. Anyway in 1992 right after we decided to start Detroit Summer, Jimmy was diagnosed with cancer.

Casteel: Mmmm

Howell: Might've even been a little earlier I can't remember. (Pause) But by the first summer, he was sick. And he promised the young people he'd be back for the second summer and he was. But he died I think a week after Detroit Summer ended or two weeks after. I mean he made it that summer.

Casteel: Yeah, he made it through.

Howell: But umm when he died, the landlord of their house, literally on the day he died came down and told Grace that she was tripling the rent it was actually the evil stepdaughter of the old woman upstairs.

Casteel: Mmmm

Howell: Evil, not evil stepdaughter evil daughter. But the evil daughter when she told Grace she was tripling the rent, those of us around knew that this was trouble. And I don't know if you've ever been to see, the thought of (laughing) moving Grace out of that house

Casteel: (laughs)

Howell: was not anything that anybody wanted to face. I mean it would of just – it would of killed her I think

Casteel: Yeah, especially not immediately.

Howell: Right, I mean literally they had – as the body was coming out, this woman was coming down the stairs. It was really crude and nasty. So a bunch of us got together and raised the money and Alice Jennings, who helped raise a lot of the money and I think gave a lot of the money; umm Alice and Carl and Donald Boggs Jimmy's son and Clem, and Dorothy, myself, their friend Freddie Pain (?), Rick, Jim Jackson, there were a bunch of us. We said we're buying this place.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: and Alice made the offer, we paid \$22,000 thousand I think or maybe \$20,000 for a house that most people at that point were just walking away. You know, nothing

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Anyway, the woman realized she was being given a good deal, and she took it.

Casteel: (chuckles) Yeah, back off lady

Howell: And umm so we bought the house, and did it as a non-profit so that we could rent to Grace. actually we never charged her rent but. so that Grace could

stay there and then we got rid of the people upstairs and turned that into the community center. But it was really, it didn't start as a political idea

Casteel: Yeah, yeah. Helping your friend.

Howell: It started as uhh helping our friend and uhh knowing that Grace – knowing that that was a historic place. I mean every major social movement of the 20th century has been through that house

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: So we, it's actually now got a historic designation from the – again thanks to Alice. Who marshalled all of that. It's now a historic site in the city.

Casteel: That's awesome

Howell: Because of all of the activity there

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: You know if you read the documentation of all of that it's a pretty accurate accounting of all of the people; but just as an example Grace was part of the 1963 march down Woodward Avenue with King.

Casteel: Mmm

Howell: After that march a group of them were considered too radical by the powers that be so they were kicked out of the follow up efforts and as a result uhh Grace and Jim and Reverend Cleage, organized the Message From the Grassroots. The Grassroots Leadership conference. And that's what brought - and that was Malcolm's last speech.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: Message to the Grassroots, it's the famous Ballot or Bullets Speech

Casteel: Wow

Howell: Actually I don't know if that – that couldn't have been his last speech. No, I take that back. That was the Ballot or Bullet speech but his last speech was at Ford Auditorium. So they worked closely with Malcolm out of that. So anyway, that's just an example

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Lots of people went through that house. So umm, so that Boggs Center has - of course Grace being a political person uhh, by 1995 we had written our – a charter and had started doing different kinds of political activity.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Much of which, you know publications, writing, uhh organizing

Howell: Much of which, you know publications, writing, umm organizing, networking, that kind of thing.

59:11

Casteel: How do you balance your life as a leader and mentor activist communities with your with your professorship at Oakland University?

Howell: Well I have been very fortunate in that my department has been very supportive of me.

Casteel: Good

Howell: Umm I think I was very fortunate at Wayne, in that I had a fabulous graduate committee. I have learned over the years not everybody's had a great graduate experience in the world. I had a terrific one. I was here for ten years (chuckles)

Casteel: (laughs)

Howell: Took me – I had my dissertation and it took me literally ten years because I could never get myself, you know, to sit down and write.

Casteel: Yeah, motivation is hard.

Howell: Yeah I mean I wrote all the time I just couldn't write the dissertation

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Umm but I did finally and its out as a book and it's here. But Bernie Brock, and Geneva Smitherman and Jim Mizell were my committee and they were terrific humans. But they certainly helped me have the confidence at Oakland umm – to insist on a tie between academic work and community work.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: And my department has been very receptive to that

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: And very supportive over the years and umm so, that has not been a hard balance for me.

Casteel: Good

Howell: the only thing I would say is that it takes time

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: and time is precious. But you know I mean, I teach classes in social movements and political communication.

Casteel: Yeah, right.

Howell: What could be better? Yeah

Casteel: Yeah. How long have you been at Oakland?

Howell: 30 some years, since '79.

Casteel: Wow

Howell: I guess that's 40 this year. Is that right? Yeah it'll be 40.

Casteel: Maybe you'll get some sort of anniversary pin

Howell: Oh they do it all the time.

Casteel: (Laughing)

Howell: They gave me a clock that didn't work for my 30th. Umm I tried to put it out in the hall and the uhh cleaning people said, "oh this must be a mistake," so they kept putting it back in.

Casteel: (laughing) it's broken

Howell: It's still here. Anyway but they've been very supportive.

Casteel: Good

Howell: And I have used what I have learned from the community to do some uhh – changes in the curriculum.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: Which has been I think healthy and valuable. I mean we now have a course in multicultural communication, its required in our major. One of the options is a capstone course, is a community experience course. Umm many of our undergraduate courses, have community experience as a way of knowing.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: and I think I have helped forge that. So I think there has been a really healthy interplay.

Casteel: Yeah

1:02:13

Casteel: So the *Metro Times* has called you a Progressive Hero

Howell: (Smiling) Oh yeah, that was so much fun. That was a long time ago, that was in the '90s.

Casteel: And as you've previously mentioned Jan Stevenson, we also did interview her already this semester

Howell: Mhmm

Casteel: and she mentioned to my colleague that you are a mentor for many LGBTQ activists in the area. Do you think these are accurate representations of your work and how do feel about the added attention these labels bring?

Howell: Well they don't bring me any added attention (laughs) I can tell you that.

Casteel: (Laughs) Yeah, well we called you.

Howell: I think the word mentor is not a very good word.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: You know it's kind of got currency somewhere in the 2000s.

Casteel: (Laughs)

Howell: The millennials seem to have brought it along.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: I think intergenerational relationships are important.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: I think because of, originally Detroit Summer and then because of the Allied Media Conference umm – that I have been very fortunate to have real relationships across generations.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Including, you know what are now, I'm trying to think , I don't have so many teenagers in my life anymore, but I certainly have people who used to be teenagers when I met them

Casteel: Right

Howell: Who are now only in their 20s. Umm More in the 30s and 40s

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: But I - you know I'm part of this National Council of Elders that its mission is intergenerational relationships, among other things. But umm Grace used to say and I kind of agree that the generational segregation in this country is probably more damaging than racial segregation because umm particularly for young people they don't have a sense of time

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: ...or process, or the wealth of strategies

Casteel: Right, yeah

Howell: ...that you need to have a great life. You know, no matter what your circumstance

Casteel: You're reinventing the wheel every time.

Howell: Yeah, and it's very damaging to young people and it's not normal in human history. I mean most of human history depended on intergenerational connection and so this sort of modern moment is not a healthy one for a lot of people. So, umm I guess I don't think of it as anything other than a critical responsibility of trying to forge those relationships

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: and pushing them wherever I can. Not just for myself but like with the Council of Elders. Certainly with the Boggs' Center we do a tremendous amount of work with young people. We have probably 5 to 6,000 people through the Center every year.

Casteel: Wow

Howell: and $\frac{3}{4}$ of them are under thirty I'm sure. You know they're high school kids, they're college kids...

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: ...they're local activists, but it's - we're really active. I mean we just - you know we were very active in the umm Facing Race Conference just this weekend. There were 3000 people, most of them not very old. We did a workshop that was packed, on visionary organizing and most of them were younger, by a lot. So umm I guess that's how - you know I just think that's part of how life is

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: And should be (laughs)

Casteel: Yeah

1:06:11

Casteel: Umm so to bring in the presidential election of 2016, what changes have you noticed in the communities in which you are active since then?

Howell: (Pause) When umm, when 9/11 happened one of my reactions was you heard all of these folks saying, "Oh, we're not safe anymore" and I thought, a lot of people have never been safe in America.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: Welcome to the club. I had hoped it would make us more conscious of vulnerability and more human. And that turned out not to be the case

Casteel: Right

Howell: It made us nastier. I blame the Bushes for that. And umm I think both Democrats and Republicans set the stage for Trump. I was not surprised by Trump's election.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: I don't think many African Americans or people of color were surprised. Umm I think in some ways it is a good thing because he has ripped off the façade...

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: of "Look how nice white people are"

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: He's a bastard

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: - and a nasty man, and a horrible human, and it's all about protecting his power and money and its right in every body's face. So I think that's a good thing.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: And people have to say, "Is this the country we are now?"

Casteel: Right

Howell: "Or are we gonna try to change that?" I think the recent election was a step in the right direction.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Umm saying all that, I think for many liberal Americans, Trump has created a deep depression. I think for far too many white males he has given them license to be awful.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: Umm I got the very worst teaching evaluations of my entire teaching career the semester of his campaign, that culminated in his election

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: and most of them were from – it was a class with mostly young white men.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: who - you could feel – you know I don't know if you teach classes but you can sometimes feel when this isn't going, but I have never I mean I didn't do anything differently than what I have always done and this was- I'm not – I'm usually like 4.8 on a 5 point scale

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: And I was at a 4, I mean it's not like I -But it was low for me

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Because there was something unleashed in these kids. I had faculty of color tell me that had got yelled at as cars would go by on our campus, you know racial slurs and things. So that Trump unleashed this thing.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: So for some whites he has been a depression, for others he has been an acceleration

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: I think for people of color I think he has forced a new determination particularly around voting. Which I think ultimately, hopefully will undo him.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: and his forces. But they have always been with us. They have not always been in the presidency, but a lot of times they have been in the presidency.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: You know Andrew Jackson was no joke, he was no great Democrat. Just ask any Native American (chuckles) what they think of him.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: You know, to some whites he's like you know – in fact the Jefferson-Jackson dinner ought to change its name in my view. But umm, so it's a complicated moment, I think it's a very dangerous moment. Umm I just wrote an article about uhh - after the Pittsburgh shooting...

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: You know I'm teaching now on a Tuesday Thursday schedule, so essentially between one class and the next, so a week's time, we had had umm pipe bombs

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: the killing in the Kroger parking lot,

Casteel: Yep

Howell: because he couldn't get into an African American church. And the killing in the synagogue. So I say to my classes, "anybody want to say anything about this past week?" dead silence, not a peep. So I kinda "you know let's get – come on"

Casteel: yeah, right.

Howell: So what they start talking about is they don't wanna talk about it, they don't wanna think about it. They are not happy that they're shut down. But they're shut down. You know this one young woman said, "I can't even shop anymore". It's like there's you know, okay

Casteel: chuckles

Howell: But I mean she was like so terrified so she said there's no place safe. I can't go to church

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: I can't go to school, I can't go to a shopping mall. I – you know I can't handle this. So what I wrote about it, that's the breeding ground for fascism. Fascism depends on us not feeling what's happening. And that's what trump is creating.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: I mean he is very systematically, very consciously - you know I don't think he's a buffoon at all. I think this constant barrage is an effort to desensitize to immobilize and it's not – at some level its working and at others it's not. So I think it's a dangerous moment. From my point of view it's the most politically dangerous time of my life and I have seen some pretty serious stuff.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Umm but that fundamental contradiction I talked about has gotten worse among some segments of our population, not better.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: And frequently the segments that it's gotten worse in are segments that are attached to both the money but also are being fueled by corporate desires to deflect and all that.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: So that's what I think about that election. I think the country never changes because of electoral politics. I think electoral politics reflects where the country is. And I think Trump is – I agree with Michelle Alexander – he is the resistance to what will be the future. Because the future isn't him. The future is clearly a majority people of color, majority queer, majority progressive.

Casteel: Right

Howell: And that's happening already in cities, that's happening already in other places. So he's the resistance, we're the wave.

Casteel: Yeah

1:13:46

Casteel: That kind of uhh wraps up my last question, which was just gives you hope for the future. And also can you think of an activist group or community organization that is currently missing from Detroit or needs to be reenergized?

Howell: You know I don't think about activist groups

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: Umm so I'm not sure what you're trying to get at. I think what is – I miss the old city councils.

Casteel: Mmm

Howell: When I first came to Detroit, Detroit had a better foreign policy than the United States of America

Casteel: Hmmm

Howell: Our city council had been among the first people to be arrested in D.C. protesting the federal support of South Africa

Casteel: Hmmm

Howell: They were in the leadership of divesting funds from banks that invested in South Africa. They sanctioned Detroit as a sanctuary city. They Created sister city relationships. They were creating independent trade agreements There was a sense of power and capacity at the municipal level which is missing.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: SO that's not an activist group.

Casteel: Right, yeah , Right.

Howell: and that's hardly radical or revolutionary but I miss it nonetheless

Casteel: yeah

Howell: Umm and some of that was the vision of Erma Henderson, Maryann Mahaffy, umm Mel Ravitz, who if you talk to Rick Robinson, Rick worked for Mel Ravitz, but they were very progressive thinking people. And people who were inventive in the policy, so I miss that.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Umm I miss people from the past. I miss Jeff greatly.* Umm mostly because he was just so clear all of the time. I miss the *Free Press*. The Newspapers are nothing now. But none of these are activist groups.

*Meaning Jeff Montgomery of the Triangle Foundation who passed away in 2016

Casteel: Yeah, right

Howell: But these are things that helped create a more progressive context in the city.

Casteel: Right

Howell: Which is what I see missing, and at the institutional level. So that all of the progressive politic is having to come from community level

Casteel: Right

Howell: and thus its reach is limited because we don't have the community institutional structures.

Casteel: yeah

Howell: So that's what I miss, it's not really - the activists I think are doing fine.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: You know we just started *Riverwise Magazine* which is terrific.

Casteel: What's *Riverwise*?

Howell: We are in our second year. We are telling all of the great stories of Detroit. Umm I should've brought you up a copy.

Casteel: Yeah, I'll have to find one.

Howell: But you can usually pick it up at the Cass Corridor,

Casteel: Okay

Howell: in the uhh Cass café, that's one of our distribution points

Casteel: Okay

Howell: Or at Avalon Bakery on Willis.

Casteel: Okay

Howell: Or you can go on the web, and we'll send it to you.

Casteel: Read it online? Okay.

Howell: Our online presence isn't very good, we are committed to print. But partly why we did *Riverwise* is because there's this vacuum of real community stories umm because the mainstream media is so bad now.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: And it's not just Detroit, there's the whole corporatization – you know I could go on and on about that

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: But it's really pretty bad. I showed in one of my classes and example, Vincent Chin – the movie *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: And it's a multicultural communication class, you know I'm trying to bring in the Asian experience. The first comment of these students is "Oh my god, what's happened to the media now" Because most of – I don't know if you've ever seen that movie?

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: But most of it is clips of news shows.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: And the students were stunned to see a news show that actually talked about substance with people who were actually doing something – I mean they were just blown away by that, (Laughing) which I had not expected at all, but you know that's how you learn right?

Casteel: (Laughing) Wasn't the direction you were thinking but hey

Howell: Right, hey we'll go with this. But so those – I miss those much more than – I mean I think the activist community is basically doing fine.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: I mean we're basically doing what we should be doing. It would be terrific if we were better. (Chuckles) You know if we were more together.

Casteel: Well yeah, of course.

Howell: Although I actually have a - somewhere in the back of my head an anarchist belief, that the more decentralized we are the better.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Particularly in this sort of repressive, militarized, increasingly controlled climate

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: That having everybody in one place doing the same thing isn't necessarily a smart move on our end.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Umm so until we build up much stronger liberated areas, which people are engaged in doing. But yeah that - I mean I met with a woman from HRC, the Human Rights Campaign -

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: - the other day, and they want to come back into Detroit. And I - Okay, you know, what I said to her was, "yeah but you guys, all you do is take money out." (Laughs)

Casteel: (Laughs)

Howell: I mean I was really not her most happy per- "and you never really helped with in any of the race stuff. In fact you made it worse."

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: They were awful for that. I mean Michelle - do you know, have you talked to Michelle Brown yet?

Casteel: No

Howell: Oh you should talk to Michelle Brown

Casteel: Okay

Howell: Because she was on the umm National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. She'd done a lot of stuff around trans rights support. She was the co-chair of Detroit Summer for many years. African American woman. I don't know if she talked to the HRC, I think she might of given them my name. I don't know. Anyway, I don't think we need another national organization - you know. I mean we've had the largest NAACP chapter in the nation. I mean, what's that got us?

Casteel: Right

Howell: You know? (Chuckles) I mean, really?

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Whereas if you think about the Urban Gardening Movement which has had zero support from any institutions. It's the largest in the world now. We are the global leader in urban gardening.

Casteel: Really?

Howell: Yes. Do you know, MSU did a study that the Detroit food system is the

HOWELL: YES. DO YOU KNOW, MISO DID A STUDY THAT THE DETROIT FOOD SYSTEM IS THE third largest employer in the city?

Casteel: Wow

Howell: And much of that has been sparked by and depends on urban gardens

Casteel: Wow

Howell: Yeah, I mean it's like, "who knew?"

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: And that's why I mean like, you know, I know that the Detroit landbank would love to have all that land. But too late

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: You know, people are at it. It's too decentralized, it's too in the fabric -

Casteel: Yep

Howell: - to be stripped away and so that's the sort of model of changes. Have you read Adrienne Maree Brown's book, *Emergent Strategies*?

Casteel: (mumbles to indicate no)

Howell: Well you should, *Emergent Strategies*. You should find Adrienne Maree Brown, umm she's queer identified. I don't if she's queer identified actually- umm she might be other-worldly identified. I don't know how she identifies these days. She's a magnificent spirit. Young person. I think - I don't know if she's 40 yet. Might be 40, maybe not. Anyway fabulous, but *Emergent Strategies*. If you just Google it.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: And she also did a book called *Octavia's Brood*, do you know the work of Octavia Butler?

Casteel: No, why does that sound familiar to me?

Howell: Octavia Butler, umm a science fiction writer

Casteel: Okay

Howell: African American futurist. And so Adrienne did a collective of writers in Detroit, who collectively wrote short stories. And they're published as *Octavia's Brood*, which has gotten uh - so if you like science fiction

Casteel: Yeah, that sounds awesome.

Howell: Afro-futurism, that's a good book. But anyway Adrienne umm, her theory, she's drawn a lot of stuff out of the Black Panther

she's drawn on a lot of stuff out of the Boggs Center.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: To talk about, when we think about social change, to think about it with biological references. Sort of more like mycelium, you know, where things are loosely connected but pop up in various places. And in the end as things decay, they transform the decay. Umm so you should check out Adrienne Maree Brown. And do you have ill Weaver as a person to talk to?

Casteel: I don't think – I don't know

Howell: Invincible. These are younger folk that - but Invincible is uhh works with on this notion of *Emergent Strategies*. They identify as they, and they have umm a website but they have a performance piece, called "Complex Movements." If you Google "Invincible Complex Movements" there are a couple of good reviews of what they've done. But I mean ill is a Detroiter, very much - has been very much involved in the Free Siwatu...

Casteel: Mmm

Howell: Effort here in the city. She's loose, free now you know. Yesterday, two days ago she got out.

Casteel: Hmmm

Howell: On bond with a monitor but anyway ill's been very involved in that, very widely respected person. umm but also can speak to and has a great sense of the need for young people for support. On your earlier question the amount of depression and suicide

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: and self-destructive behavior is just so intense with these kids.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: And by kids I mean 30 and under, I don't mean –

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: Certainly, I mean up until – I mean if they make it to 30 then they have made sort of I think. But even so some of them are still wrestling with – I know 40 year olds who are dealing with serious depression issues.

Casteel: Mhmm

Howell: Anyway those are people you might wanna just check out.

Casteel: Yeah, thank you so much for this

Howell: Because that will uhh – just in terms of what you don't wanna do is look

at this as a white experience.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: And there's so many - I mean ill is I don't know if they consider themselves European American, but both Michelle as an older person, and Adrienne as a younger person. And ill is very into people of color community, I mean they have a lot of respect there.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: And can hook you up with other folk, I'm sure.

Casteel: Great

Howell: If they're willing

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: I don't know if they will or not, they don't like interviews. But

Casteel: Well thank you so much -

Howell: Well sure.

Casteel: for agreeing to do this with me Shea, I really appreciate it. And I think you have some really great things to tell us about and I hope this will help future generations with their research, and get more involved in the city.

Howell: Yeah I hope so too, in a good way.

Casteel: Yeah

Howell: As opposed to blank canvas.