

Oral History Project

On behalf of UCSD Race and Oral History in San Diego (HIUS 144)

Interviewee: Maryan Osman

Interviewer: Gaia Grippa

Date: 8th of May 2020

M: Maryan Osman

G: Gaia Grippa

G: Okay. Okay, so my name is Gaia Grippa. Today is the 8th of May 2020 and I am interviewing Maryan Osman through Zoom call for the UCSD Race and Oral history project. Can you please state your full name, date of birth and place of birth?

M: Hi yeah, my name is Maryan Osman uhm born on February 8th, 1994 and my place of birth is right here in San Diego, California.

G: Great. Thank you. Uhm. Could you please read the oral history release form?

M: Sure. So this interview is conducted in accordance with the goals and course description of HIUS 144, Race and Oral History in San Diego under the direction of Professors Luis Alvarez, Yen Espiritu and Simeon Man.

In consideration of the recording and preservation of this oral history by students of the University of California, San Diego, I the Interviewee, Maryan Osman, and

G: I the interviewer Gaia Grippa,

M: hereby transfer to the University the rights to publish, duplicate, or otherwise use the recording(s) and transcribed interview(s), and any photographs and/or videotaped footage taken during the interview. This includes publication rights in print and electronic form such as on the Internet, the right to rebroadcast the interview or portions thereof, and permission to transfer the interview to future media.

The University of California, San Diego hereby agree to preserve the products of this oral history interview according to accepted professional standards and agree to provide the narrator and interviewer with access to the taped interviews.

G: Okay, perfect. Thank you. Uhm, so, how are you today?

M: I'm doing good, it's not too bad of a day. It's very breezy so I just got back from a walk on my lunch break.

G: That's great. So uhm, to get started, could you tell me more about yourself? For example about your background and your work?

M: Yeah, definitely. So I uhm like I said I was born and raised here in San Diego, California. I've lived in primarily the Southeast neighbourhood of San Diego, but I was born in City Heights and up until recently have moved back to City Heights.

And City Heights is actually where I work, I work in a non-profit called Mid-City Community Advocacy Network, or Mid-City CAN for short, and we do a lot of advocacy and community organizing work and my role in the organization is actually Leadership Development support. So how do we support our leaders who really rising in our campaigns? And how do we provide them with the tools to build the power that they wish to, to really develop for their people? So I, I do a lot of leadership development support with like just kind of just marginalized communities that live in Mid-City Heights and in Mid-City area. And then also we've expanded it to supporting folks in communities similar to ours across the region both in the city as well as the county of San Diego. So that's what I primarily do. I do a lot of efforts especially when it comes to decision making boards such as boards and commissions at our government levels in order to ensure that we have a really diverse representation that reflects our community in these really important influential boards. So that's primarily what I work on.

G: Okay, thank you. And what is it the, your relationship with your community then? Would you say?

M: Uhm, I have a very I guess like strong love or I, I guess a very warm tie to the community because even though I was born in City Heights and then I lived primarily in another part of town, Southeast San Diego, I've always felt that City Heights was really, really special to me. And for me, it's where I went to high school uhm when I was in college. It's where I spent my community service hours and time and really uhm my friends and I on campus even created an organization to support our community that lived in City Heights as well.

So uhm, it's where I had family, it's where I have a lot of friends who are very close to me and City Heights was really for a long time home, even though I was born there but wasn't raised in the community for a while, but I've always returned to it just because of the familial ties, personal ties and educational ties and I have. So it's a very important community for me because it's the most urban and dense part of San Diego so it has so much diversity and really reflects our regional uhm, a lot of the representation within our region just in those like 6 miles or so and uhm it's very eclectic. There's so much culture that lives within City Heights and because of that there's just so much beauty and passion and potential and accomplishments. Just like wonder that resides in the community. And so, for me City Heights is really important because of that and it's where I found a lot of myself whether I was at school or uhm through, you know, my personal ties with my family and my loved ones. Uhm City Heights is really just kind of been a landmark for a lot of really important transitional periods in my life and a lot of self-discovery. So, uhm, it's a community that matters a lot to me and definitely always is on my mind, for sure. And I'm lucky to have continued to be a part of it with my job and to have moved there recently as well.

G: Ok thank you. Uhm so regarding your family background, where did you grow up? And what memories do you have of your childhood?

M: Yeah, so my parents are actually uhm Somali refugees. They came to the States about a little over a year, like a year and a half before I was born. So they came here, they had me pretty quickly then and I was, I mean, I've been here ever since I was born so I was born and raised in San Diego and I primarily was raised in the Southeast community. That's where my family still lives to this day uhm and for me, uhm you know, where, the ties that I've had with where I've lived has been really important. Especially in the past couple of years because Southeast community uhm, just like the City Heights, is like a significant black population.

And so that's meant a lot to me growing up and maybe discovering that as an adult since I didn't get the chance to go to school within my neighbourhood.

Uhm. When I graduated college, I really spent a lot of time trying to rediscover my neighbourhood through my own views as an adult since I didn't get to learn it as a student or as a youth, uhm, since I did get my parents did take me out of the neighbourhood for school throughout my whole entire education experience. So for me, uhm, Southeast and City Heights are both very, very important parts of my community uhm and it's been really great to just kind of really understand the different communities that reside in both of those areas, but also see the beauty that really exists in two, two areas that are so similar but also so different and just really excel in their own way. Uhm. But yeah.

G: Do you think it influenced your personality, growing up in that environment?

M: Oh, yeah. I think, uhm, for me I know about just living in Southeast and just seeing like so many just diverse communities because it's very populated by the black community, the Asian community and the Latinx community and so, just having all of those different perspectives around me at all times was really amazing. It just, it felt so comforting to the point that whenever I went to areas that weren't really as diverse as Southeast or City Heights, uhm, it was like almost a culture shock. It was something I was not prepared for, even within my own City. So, it gave me the sense of security and safety that I think I, I really needed growing up and especially as an adult love to return to and still return to. And really, it inspired in me the desire to do the work that I do because I saw first-hand the obstacles that our communities went through, the neglect the, the uhm over policing the, you know, the, the stripping of like so many rights and as a result it really inspired me to want to ensure that that isn't the norm, that, you know, our resilience uhm is not only highlighted but that we receive what we deserve as well. And so, I think it did not only shape my personality but it definitely shaped the very trajectory of where my life ended up down the road.

G: And, uhm, what do you think are like the main values that came out of that period, by the community?

M: I think the main values that I definitely uhm always think about whenever I think about you know, uhm, where I was born or where I was raised. Uhm, it's just the value of, of really

comfort. So I always felt like there was a sense of comfort and a sense of welcoming, a sense of uhm cultivating like familiar relationships with one another and really intentional community building. I've always felt that whether it was Southeast or City Heights there was always this, this value of just like, you know, we matter and we value one another and uhm, and really highlighting that with a one another and building that community, that resilience, those relationships and there was just a lot of, one thing I would think of, there's always a lot of laughter.

There was always a lot of just like beauty uhm, a lot of celebration. Even through all the challenges and obstacles that we faced, people still smiled, people were still dancing or like playing music in the streets. There's, you know, whenever I think of Southeast or City Heights, I always think of culture, I think uhm the value of just, uhm, you know, embracing our, our own ancestry and, and bringing that forth within the very community that we now reside in and creating this like beautiful sort of like just culmination of all the different lived experiences that we've all had. Uhm, so I feel like those are some of the key things that really stood out to me. It's just the resilience, the desire to always really celebrate one another and the sense of always building that familial sort of relationship and that sense of community.

G: I see you said comfort a lot. What exactly do you mean by that like, and how, and in what form?

M: Yeah, so I think for people uhm. I think for me specifically, for someone who came from an immigrant family it's, it's very hard sometimes to be in spaces where I'm not with other communities that understand either that immigrant experience or that, uhm, that experience of feeling marginalized or uhm, really disenfranchised. And so for me being in spaces that are really primarily people of colour or uhm, you know, or especially like in Southeast like there was a significant black population, which is very important for me growing up and being in spaces that had a lot of religious diversity and just kind of really uhm seeing that celebrated provided a sense of comfort but also made me feel that I wasn't only seen day to day, but I was heard I was, I was celebrated. Uhm, you know, that my experience wasn't abnormal. And I remember this was so profound for me and provided such a safety that it wasn't until I went to college where I had like a culture shock within my own city because before college, I went to high school in City Heights, or I went to uhm you know, elementary and middle school with a, a Muslim community up in the Clairemont where there's a lot of diversity there as

well. And I grew up in Southeast where there's a lot of diversity, especially with then the Black, Asian and Latinx population. And so, for me to go SDSU, it was just like, I suddenly felt small uhm and I felt like I definitely stood out. Was very, very surprising for me and it really reinforced in me the sense of comfort and safety that I've always felt in my communities, because I never felt like I stood out. I always felt like I was a part of the experience that, that was, that we were being not only, like, celebrated but really uhm, held up to and like highlighted, for sure.

G: Ok, thank you. Uhm. How would you describe your community?

M: How, how would I describe them? Uhm, I would describe our communities with so much love and persistence and drive. I mean, this is a community uhm, whether in Southeast or City Heights, for me those are communities that talk but really talked so much about the value of supporting, uplifting, loving one another but not only talk about the things, we would execute it. You know, I'd say like there is a lot of uhm, a lot of joy. That really exists despite all the stuff that we've had to undergo and I whenever I think of our communities, I always think of laughter, I think of music. Like I said before, I think of uhm, this desire to really be the best, to do the best for your family. The centring of families and those you love. That collective spirit instead of it being focused on that one individual mindset. Uhm, the sense of like a shared kind of, a shared power and a shared sense of ownership and uhm, a shared sense of pride is what else I think of when I think of our community.

Because a lot of our folks, you mean, they went through very, really like challenging or traumatic experiences to get to where they are now. Our communities are immigrants, or even if they didn't recently immigrate like, they come from a line of folks who encountered a lot of injustice and centuries. And so, it's just that sense of like oh, not only resilience and persistence but really the joy in being resilient and being persistent is what I see so much. And I think that's what drives me all the time, is that we don't do the stuff that we do in our community just for the sake of doing it, but that there's a sense of love that drives it and a sense of passion and, and willingness to really build community with one another and that's just what I see in both the communities that I, I love.

G: And are there episodes or traditions in particular that come to mind, that this helps describe the community for you?

M: Um, so one, one thing that has uhm, for example, that has happened recently. Well, so there are two. So there's one that's been going on recently. And so, I grew up in Southeast but specifically in the Paradise Hills neighbourhood, and one thing that I really, really loved seeing lately is uhm, they've done the Paradise held like Night Market, where the whole entire community will come together on this like uhm, local school campus football field area and you'll just see this like parade of just all these different communities or really folks and, and uhm individuals and families that live within the Paradise Hill Neighbourhood. And they're celebrating their neighbourhood, a neighbourhood that doesn't usually get celebrated and it's just been amazing to see that really developed the past couple years. And oh, and really to the point that they've like, there's even like Facebook groups and stuff like that where it's just simply focus on that part of town. And so, it's just been amazing to see that form and it's, it's also reminded me of uhm City Hights.

So in City Heights for a long time there was also like a diversity sort of uhm, fair that went out every single year where people from all the different customs and, and cultures would really get to highlight that and they'd get to play the different music or cultural dances or attires or just, you know, the different food. And uhm, and seeing that celebrated all the time in City Heights was also really phenomenal and super important for me growing up. And I know, specifically for me being part of the Somali Community which is really prominent in City Heights, uhm, it was always great to go to like Somali-centred events or you know, things that were happening, whether it was like parties or celebration of Somali Independence Day and stuff like that. Just like all the different uhm, I don't know, just so many different celebrations that I've seen throughout the years have, have really reminded me of how important our communities are and how much they really build community with one another.

G: All right. I'm very curious, how it was uhm, how do you celebrate Somali New Years' here in San Diego?

M: Yeah. I meant Somalia Independence Day.

G: Ah ok.

M: But the way we celebrated it is uhm, so our independence is July 1st, so uhm it would normally happen like there's, there's usually a couple of different events that happened but the main one is like the huge festivity of kind of like at a park. Uhm. I mean a big park where there are just like a bunch of activities for the kids. There's like some Somali music playing, there's traditional dances, people wear a lot of their flags or cultural tires, uhm. And it's like the one time that even maybe families who don't maybe practice a lot of uhm, I guess like traditional events with maybe community at large, they will actually show up to these kind of spaces. Because it's still, it's, it's just a reminder that you know, like we have people who like, we have a community here. We're not alone and to see that celebrating with one another in a space that we've all now found home in together is just phenomenal and I, I really loved it. I didn't go too often because I didn't live in City Heights and my parents didn't always want to drive to City Heights because they worked so much that they didn't always have the time. But whenever we could we would try to go to the uhm the Independence Day activities because it's just, it always felt like oh these are my people, you know, it's amazing to just feel that sense of uhm, belonging uhm, even, even in the community where you already feel like you belong but especially when it's like your folks within that community that's, that's always been amazing for me.

G: Uhm, and so are there elements of your community that you are particularly attached to?

M: Elements of, as in like, like traditional or do you just mean like?

G: Yeah traditions, even like small traditions. I would say like small, regular things that are done and that are particular to your community, and so you're, you're attached to?

M: Uhm, it's a good question. Uhm. So one thing that I was really attached to and I don't, uhm unfortunately this space doesn't exist anymore, but it was something that was really meaningful for a lot of folks, was the East African uhm Cultural Community Centre that was on basically University and Fairmont, so like right smack in the middle of City Heights. That was a space that meant a lot to me 'cause there are so many East African events that were hosted there, especially for the small community. They're like weddings there uhm, and it was, it was great when I was in college and I started like a Somali health student organization with some of my friends on campus. Like, we hosted our community events in that space. So even when I was in school, it was like an opportunity for me to continue to engage my

community and it was such a cultural like, space for us. And it wasn't just for East Africans specifically, but that space was utilized by like so many different refugee and immigrant populations within our neighbourhood and within our city at large. So, for me that was a place that meant a lot for me and uhm, it was present throughout really a good chunk of my life. Uhm, probably in the most recent years especially. And so it, it was hard to see that we lost that space but uhm it, it was definitely, you know, probably one of my most favourite parts to be in town uhm because it just meant a lot.

G: Uhm, so what made you decide to get involved in community work?

M: Yeah, so when I was growing up I, like I said, I was from City Heights. I grew up in Southeast and I didn't go to school in Southeast, so I ended up going to school in, in a completely different community. I went to school in uhm, some community in Clairemont. And the thing is like, even though that was a community that was also very diverse, it was a completely different reality when it came to socioeconomic status and uhm. Through my elementary and Middle School experience I became very aware of kind of the, the barriers that we went through where I lived and how I, growing up, I thought everybody had that similar experience. Because my parents, you know, they didn't, they did their best to always make me feel like I was, you know, like our family was special, that we weren't going through any big challenges or anything. That we were really making it out strong and uhm, and they really protected us from a lot of the struggles that we had. And so it wasn't until I went to a more affluent part of town where it was still really uhm, diverse, but it was still a reminder of just kind of what we had gone, what, what my family was kind of struggling with that I hadn't realized, like things such as, you know, we didn't have, uhm, private health insurance. What we had was literally through the state, like we couldn't afford Private health insurance. And so, we couldn't go to like private healthcare. We couldn't take vacations. We had to be more frugal with stuff like that. And we had to, a lot of our enjoyment uhm, which I really cherish now, but I mean it was just interesting when you're younger and just kind of seeing that like, a lot of our enjoyments growing up were very much like things that you do either for free or for very cheap. And uhm, and it was kind of like an introduction to just the reality like oh, you know, there are people who don't kind of have to experience the, the, I guess the struggle with money or just the challenges with health and stuff like that uhm, and jobs like the way my family did.

And then when I went to college, I really became even more aware of that because I was studying biology and I had friends who were uhm, also in the public health sector. So between our, you know, our groups we were always talking about health and, and I really became even more aware to kind of not only of the inequities, but the barriers that were in place that would produce those inequities and kind of just the lack of not only focus but uhm kind of like really the lack of pursuit of justice and really addressing those. And these always felt like all that our people got were band-aids and that's it. And so, we just kind of saw this continuous cycle, you know, when I was in college, and it reached the point where I just got really, really, really fed up with that. And even though I was a biology student that was over-committed and busy. I mean, I worked on campus since the minute I started school basically and, and then on top of that I was in a research lab and it was just like I did a lot of stuff so I had very little time to be involved.

But in my last two years, I just knew I needed to get involved with community stuff because it got to a point where I couldn't feel comfortable standing by anymore and just seeing it first hand with my family and my friends' families, but also seeing it in like the very classes that I took and learning about it. It just, it made me, it made me not only upset but also made me have this fire to like, what can I do? You know, even if I don't have much, what can I do? And so that's how we ended up finding uhm, that there wasn't really work being done on campus regarding the Somali community and so my friends and I created SOMHealth which is like the Somali health organization on campus at SDSU. And we did a lot of uhm, health education help workshops to, to the Somali population, but we did an incorporation with other populations in City Heights community so that we can really create this like multicultural uhm, perspective and really like what impacts one community impacts all community. So, we worked a lot with like the Latinx community and other student orgs(*organisations*), in regards to Health Equity. And through that experience in my last two years of college I really realized that, even though health education and health promotion was super helpful and it made me feel like I was doing something with what I could, it was a reminder that uhm once again, it felt like those band-aid to something that needed to be fixed. Like the very root of what was causing a lot of our inequities were not being addressed. And so, that's how I came to the decision that when I graduated college. I wasn't going to pursue science anymore. I was going to transition to doing uhm, like equity work that's really rooted in justice and uhm, in ensuring that we change the system and, you know, reform it or even just entirely build a new one altogether. So that was, that was kind of how I got to that point of realising that I wanted

to be involved with health equity and health justice and, and what that meant for our communities.

G: And uhm, during that, why did you decide to get involved in community leadership?

M: Because I, uhm, so for a long time I've always been afraid of leadership 'cause I never thought I could be a leader. I was someone who didn't have like the biggest personality I, uhm, I always worked really well behind the scenes so I always, I always like got that that was just who I was meant to be, someone who was behind the scenes. Uhm, and I thought leadership was someone who's always in the front, someone who's always in the centre of attention. I thought being a leader meant like you had to have the loudest voice or the most extroverted personality or the most outgoing like, kind of style and so uhm.

For me, like owning my own leadership was a very, very hard journey and it took a lot of like, really people asking me to step in before I felt comfortable stepping in. And so, through college whether it was at my employment or whether it was in uhm the research labs I was a part of or whether it was with some help. I always just shied away from being a leader because I never thought I'd have what it takes to be a leader even though I really was passionate. I was driven uhm, I've dedicated so many hours to things and I always did my best to really learn. And on top of that always do my best to like train other folks along with me because I always wanted it to go beyond one person holding a lot of this stuff and through that experience uhm, other people started to see a leader in me but I had yet not seen. And so, by the time I graduated college I still was unable to come to terms with that and didn't really understand, like I still didn't see myself as a leader.

And it wasn't until I came to Mid-City CAN that I saw first-hand, you know uhm, what it means to be a leader and that the most loudest person or that the most bold person or even the most confident person isn't always the strongest leader. And I saw that because I was a policy intern. I mean, I went to a lot of uhm council meetings and a lot of like government really related stuff and also a lot of like non-profit related meetings and I just thought in those spaces that there were leaders I was identifying that didn't really model what I always thought being a leader was. If anything, they modelled what I thought a leader should be. And they weren't always the loudest person and they weren't always the first person to talk or really had the strongest personality, but they, they went from a place that I always thought leadership

should be from. And through that experience, I really started to understand my own leadership and really the value of what leadership looks like and community leadership. And then I got to further work towards that when I got hired on to support our leadership development specialist at Mid-City CAN, and through her I really just, my eyes were like super open on what leadership could look like. Because she's like the perfect embodiment of someone who also went through the same journey where she thought someone like her could never be a leader. And it's like, almost those who you don't expect to be leaders who tend to be some of the strongest leaders uhm because it's they don't think it'd be on their own leadership. You know, they're thinking about it from a, a community perspective, which is I think how leadership should always be, be really rooted in. So that's how I ended up uhm doing leadership work, because I kind of went through my own journey throughout life, especially in college. And then when I was at Mid-City CAN and I was fortunate to really get exposure to what leadership could really look like.

G: So, what do you think are like the values a leader should have? Like in your, in the terms of the leaders you've met.

M: Uhm, so for me, the number one thing that a leader really needs to embody is a sense of being rooted in the community that they are leading with. Uhm, and so I think like community mindedness is a priority. I think a sense of uhm, being able to share your leadership is really important to me. I don't believe in like a hierarchy of leadership. I really believe in leadership that is rooted in the service of the community, and in not only on behalf of them but with them. And so, you really do your best to distribute and share your leadership as best as possible. I believe that leadership that is super authentic to the values of those you're working with and so, I think if you are really going to become a leader of something, then you have to really embody what you're leading in your leadership style. Whatever that looks like, you know, there are some communities that have certain ways that they like to really uhm, operate and so if you're going to be a leader in that community, you're going to respect what that community's values are in your own leadership as well. And I strongly believe uhm, in leadership that goes beyond an individual or even uhm a group. I think like a leadership to me, like to truly be a leader you're thinking beyond just what you can do, but you're thinking more 'how can I as a leader return resources down to the very people who I am technically leading or in leadership with?'. Uhm, and it really goes into beyond a sense of like authority,

which a lot of people assume leadership is, and into more in uhm, harmony and uhm community building space, which is I think what really leadership should be for the most part.

G: Is that like? Oh, how you also view it in your community work like...?

M: Yeah,

G: Uhm. So how do you feel about, so now we're gonna talk about your work with Mid-City CAN, and how do you feel about the organization's mission and community work?

M: Uhm. I love working at Mid-City CAN. And I think, when I first graduated from college, I wasn't sure what I was going to do because I was changing careers and I was so confused on how that would even happen. Uhm, but for me, what really worked out for me was that I came across Mid-City CAN and uhm, and I saw their mission and I instantly fell in love. I mean, the mission of Mid-City CAN is to really fight for the health and safety of our community but doing so through the community's wishes. Like, uhm, we run campaigns that we don't come up with. The campaigns are entirely resident driven, so that means that there's like a whole process where the residents come to us, they say what they, what they want the campaign's to be about and then if there's enough momentum, we call up momentum teams. So, there's enough momentum that's around it and uhm, and we can find like uhm, like ways to support it, and we go ahead and those are the campaigns that we run. So the thing I really value at Mid-City CAN it's so rooted in resident uhm power and leadership that the very things that we do is like decided by the residents and I think that's like a unique perspective that Mid-City CAN provides that I think a lot of organizations that do a lot of community work don't always return to the very community that they might be involved in when it comes to making critical decisions. And uhm, and I value that at Mid-City CAN like in momentum teams all these campaigns that are being run. It's really done with the residents, they are the ones who decide. Our, our organizers are merely kind of like facilitators who are trying to help accomplish the change they wish to see, like they're there to support the residents to make it happen. Uhm, they're there to do the work that they can in building relationships or providing resources to accomplish some dreams that they wish to make real. And so, that's what I really respect about Mid-City CAN, is that it really centres the residents and it's all about resident's uhm, power building and, and that's like what I really value about that.

And so, that's the kind of work that I'm most interested in, is 'how do we do justice and equity work but centring those most impacted?'. Because at the end of the day, they're the ones who have the solutions. And at Mid-City CAN, I've always loved working here and I've been here for three years now almost because of the fact that we really embody that with the very work that we do. And uhm, the solutions are centred by the very residents who come up with the campaigns to begin with and they're the ones who uhm, really understand it. So, I think that's what's definitely most exciting, and then my work in leadership development is really 'how do we provide uhm leadership support for those folks as well on their journeys?'

G: And so how did you first approach the organization?

M: I actually joined Mid-City CAN as a policy intern. I was uhm, so there's this organization called Help Career Connection. They're public health like non-profit and they place uhm, people who are interested in public health whether it's like healthcare providers, health care administration, to like policy like I was. And they connect to students that they accept basically into their summer program to non-profits or uhm, organizations or businesses that they're working with. And so, I was interested in health policy, I applied literally the day before the application was due because I found about it super, super last minute at the end of 2016. Yeah, basically a week or two after I graduate from college I found out about it and then I was lucky enough to have uh Mid-City CAN be one of the organization's I got an interview with you. And lucky for me I guess we both just ended up liking each other and I picked Mid-City CAN, they picked me and that's how I ended up becoming a policy intern in the summer of 2017. Uhm, and I've been with them basically ever since, so I transitioned from policy intern to an actual staff member during the fall.

G: So how different was your work from policy intern to what you're doing now? Is it very different or are there like similarities?

M: Yeah, that's actually a good question. So, I work on completely different sides now. When I was a policy intern, I was working very closely with our organizers, in particular worked with the transportation campaign. And so, I went to a lot of uhm like council meetings. I went to like a lot of coalition meetings a lot of uhm, kind of lobby visits with elected officials. I did a lot of policy research. So, it was very much rooted in like policy and organizing. And then now that I do leadership development work it's like a different uhm space that I operate

within. So, now we do a lot of like uhm with my colleague I, we work a lot on like 'how do we have leadership development programs?'. Uhm, so it's a lot of my programming and then also, how do you uhm, at least for me, I still go to like meetings but they're different meetings now.

Instead of going to a lot of council meetings or boards of supervisors meeting, I'll go to boards and commissions meeting. So, it's a different form of government. Uhm, I'm now building relationship with different to people and government. Like, I'm building relationships with council staff, but I'm also building relationships with uhm department staff now. And it's sort of like, a lot of the tools that I learned in that uhm summer internship was really helpful. To know how do you do uhm, policy support for leaders that you want to play some very instrumental chords. Uhm, especially for the campaigns that you run or just for general like uhm impact. And so, I felt like a lot of the tools that I gained as an intern were able to be translated into my space solution development specialist. Uhm, but it is different space than I'm operating. I'm working with similar folks but also a lot of new folks that are different. And uhm, and there's a lot more program programming involved uhm because we do have like actual programs that we run and alumni that we engage. So, there's a lot more of like a programmatic uhm, I guess been to my work now than there was when I was a policy intern.

G: So actually, about uhm, the programs and the projects of Mid-City CAN, what are the ones you're most invested in or you feel more passionate about?

M: So, the ones that I'm most involved in is our 'Boards and Commissions' program. So, we have two programs. We have uhm, the 'Boards and Commissions' program and then we have a 'Resident Leadership Academy' program.

The 'Boards and Commissions' program is the one that will actually not only train leaders, but actually facilitate their placement on to really impactful boards and commissions. So like, those are basically like advisory boards that really uhm advise the City Council or the Board of Supervisors on how to, or even like departments like the planning department, on some of the decisions that they have to make. And so, they're very, very influential because they're guiding policy, they're guiding programs. They're getting a lot of like uhm, budget and stuff like that and they are routinely uhm, dominated by people who don't reflect our communities. Specifically folks who are more wealthier uhm, especially men and especially like white older

men. And so it's a lot of the same like, typical type of folks who really are in those places and I really believe in our program because we are, you know, we are training and, and really building leadership with folks in their community who already are leaders and just are looking for opportunities to gain more resources and knowledge that they can execute their leadership on to an influential board where they can shift policy and they can put into practice all that they've really been working on and believe in into a decision making space. But it's going to really create impact on their community uhm, but also in the community at large with outside of even the very region that they were living with their neighbourhood they live in. And so I love doing that work.

That's a program that probably is uhm, most important to me because it's also the one I work on the most. I work very closely with the alumni of the program and I go to a lot of like commission meetings and build relationships with like staffers for those commission's or elected officials to attend the commission's or appoint people commission. So there's a lot of work that I do with in that arena uhm, so it matters a lot to me. And then uhm, outside of like just the two programs, I think the campaign that I've always been rotating most towards is probably our uhm transportation campaign. It's like the one that I did when I was a policy intern and through that experience I realized 'wow transportation is super important'. And so uhm, I really grew to love the issue and uhm, and how critical it is. So that's probably the campaign outside of a program that I would say I'm most uhm, interested in personally.

G: So where do you see the organization going? How do you see it like growing?

M: Yeah, uhm, I don't know that's a good question. It's a question that I think organizations are always having and our is no different. Uhm, last year was our 30th year so we've been around for quite a bit and we've been having conversations. So, you know, now that we're over 30 years old, what does that look like? You know, uhm, especially because our work is so rooted in City Heights, but it's so impactful regionally. I mean, a lot of the stuff that we do goes beyond just the neighbourhood that we centre because a lot of the issues we fight for are important to other communities of colour within like San Diego, but also within the County of San Diego as a whole and sometimes even you know, some of the work goes all the way up to the state level. And so, I think uhm, personally like the vision that I see happening is that we continue to really uhm, uplift those who are most impacted. That we continue to put them in like very influential decision-making boards. That we continue to empower our residents to

uhm, to really shift the very policies that they wish to make happen and really change the fabric of the unjust society we live in all together into one that you know, really recognizes and applauds their work and their value and centres and all that's being done. And I mean, in my dream like Mid-City CAN in the work that I like, not only our organization does but all the orgs(organizations) are really part of this fight. I mean, our dream is that, we don't have to keep fighting this anymore. That there's, we reach a point where you know, it's like...

G: That's fair.

M: Yeah. It's like goes, it's no longer necessary that we have these fights every day. Obviously that's like a very far away thing at this moment, but it's still something that we're constantly working towards like 'how do we, we create a community that we can all thrive in?'. That, you know, we can all prosper in and that is just and safe and healthy for all of us. And so that's where I see us continuing. This, to have that fight whether it's like in the city level, the neighbourhood level, the county level or at the state level. You know, whatever avenue we're involved in I think that's um, that's where we will always be prioritizing: people who are most impacted in ways that will create uhm, really uhm, an equitable life for us all.

G: Thank you, uhm, I wanted to ask you some questions related to the current COVID situation. So, how are you and your community impacted by the current COVID-19 pandemic and how did you react to the sudden changes and uncertainty that it caused?

M: Mhm, uhm. So it's, it's hard because the COVID-19 crisis uhm, and as we are seeing even in like the actual people who are impacted by COVID. Uhm, I think it's really unreal to a lot of people who may not have seen otherwise just a lot of the failures that we've had and kind of uhm, the way everything operates. The fact that uhm, now I think, I think it really shone light on a lot of the challenges that people may not have always been paying attention to or that people like in our communities have been talking about for so long but has not been recognized. And it's really unfortunate because while that's the case, uhm I feel that, unfortunately, it's sad because we're seeing first-hand really how inequitable and unjust our society is. I mean, those who are most impacted uhm disproportionately by COVID-19 are the very folks who live in our community. So like, you know, the black community, the community of immigrants, refugees, indigenous, people of colour,, if you come from a lower-income family uhm, you know, if you have a lack of health insurance, things of that nature.

All these different marginalized groups. Just all these inequities and disparities that have existed for so long are now starting to uhm, to really become even greater because uhm this disease does impact us. So, this disease impacts everyone but especially impacts those who are unable to uhm, to really like take care of their own health and their own livelihood and their own family because of inequities' in place. I mean, essential workers who are still working are primarily folks in our communities, who are the ones who are naturally putting themselves more at risk. And on top of that they are the ones who are already disproportionately more likely to get sick because they don't have the Health Care system in place that works for them or, or uhm really is equitable for them. And they, you know, the employment opportunities that they can't work from home, lack of paid sick leave, like all these issues. And so, I think COVID-19 unfortunately has impacted us more greatly while also showing the reality of the, of that inequity that people may not have realized.

And for us it was very hard because a lot of our community in City Heights are those who are most harmed by the, the virus and so it was really hard for us because we get calls from people like 'I lost my job' or they're worried about paying their bills or they're worried about, you know, even if this dies down like, like how, 'how can we get work again?'. Like how are they gonna find opportunities or uhm, you know, healthcare access with language barriers. Like, they don't understand everything that's always coming out every single day because it's not always in the language that they speak. And so we've been trying to do our best to provide as much resources, and I think what's been great is that like we continuously are sharing resources. We are translating into the languages that we can and in our community our organisers are always in touch with our community that we're engaging uhm, would put ourselves and make ourselves super transparent and accessible for them. And we're even like hiring like two, two like programs assistance specifically for languages in need so that we can get more additional support in those languages uhm to connect with the communities as they are hurting. But it's been, it's been really hard. I mean, the reason we do what we do is because of the obstacles in place and so to see those obstacles get so much more severe for our folks because of just the way everything is set up in the fact that those most likely to be harmed are unfortunately disproportionately our community members. It's made it very challenging for us for sure.

Uhm, and that's why you know, right now locally there are budget fights happening when it comes to resources and allocation and there's gonna be a lot of cuts going around. And so

we're fighting really, really hard to make sure that our community yeah, you know, that they are centred in most fights and our leaders in those governments spaces uhm continue to keep them in mind and that they have a responsibility to really be pushing forward for them since they are the ones who unfortunately are most impacted by this, by this virus. Whether it's like health-wise or even just all other avenues, from financials to like housing to uhm, to other pieces. So that's kind of where we're at, is we're doing our best to adapt as quick as possible, uhm you know, but and we are doing our best to, to really do that and we've been making calls. We've made like over like 4,300 calls already just talking to people in City Heights asking 'how are you doing?'. Checking in, getting there. We are requesting the resources that may be connected to you know, we're looking at potential opportunities to build even more partnership for folks to, to help leverage all of that to make it better for our community? But yeah, it's a hard place to be in. Still, we are doing what we can and adapting as quickly as possible for our folks.

G: So how has it changed the way you do community work, like having everything remotely?

M: Yeah, honestly, it was, there is definitely a transition period where we had to adapt to that uhm, because a lot of our work is super just like personal and, and not only just like with the relationships we build but even the meetings that we hold and events that we put on. A lot of that super rooted in the intention of building community and that has always been in person and so for us, it did take us some time to figure out 'ok, how can we do it digitally?'. And I mean, our organizers have been really great because they've been doing a lot of community building even in a digital space with our community. And so uhm, they adapted to it really well by having more, you know, more one-on-one kind of check ins or creating space uhm for them, with them in mind by asking them how folks would like to continue to relate and stuff like that knowing that's going to be virtual. So it was a challenge at first. There's definitely a transition period but I think at this point we've pretty much kind of adapted pretty well. At this point, we've gotten pretty accustomed to organizing in this new space, this more digital space. And uhm, and I think like, you know, checking in with our community first and foremost and just kind of seeing the needs that they had and then doing our best to accommodate them and then create a space for them that, that worked for them has been really helpful in creating stuff. You know, continue to build community but in a way that still works for community and so uhm, it was hard for a few weeks. I'm not, I'm not going to lie. I think, you know, it

was hard because even us. I mean, at the end of the day we work here but we also are people so, you know, we had our own worries and just like our own families and dealing with like quarantine and individually. So I think that's one thing we also really stressed is that uhm, to make sure that we also take care of ourselves in the process because it's, this isn't, this is already hard work as it's because you put so much of yourself into it and so much of your passion and your life is involved in the work that we do uhm with our community, but it's even more challenging when you don't take care of yourself in the process. Especially in very, very challenging times like this because many, many of our, even our own stuff, like we've had a lot of challenges uhm obviously, you know with, with family members or friends or loved ones who been impacted in some way by the virus. And so it's been, it's been hard but I think right now we have kind of an idea of how that works for us, how it works for our people and it's been going pretty well. I think we've adapted pretty quickly uhm and done our best. But yeah, it was definitely a transition period for sure to move everything to a more digital format.

G: How do you think uhm it's gonna impact in the long term like how you do community work, like do you think it's likely like going to go back to how it was before or do you think it's gonna change it?

M: That's a good question. Honestly, I have been wondering the same thing. I think it's the reality is that unfortunately like, until there's a treatment or vaccine, things are going to be kind of like this for a very, very long time. For, you know, probably well over a year if not two years. And so I, I've been personally, at least for me, I've come to terms with the fact that the way we do things are naturally going to probably change. And uhm, I think this has really fuelled a lot of the community members, the activists, the advocates. And they've just, I think, this is really lit a fire in folks who are already doing the work that you know, we've literally gone through a pandemic and we're, we're seeing first-hand the impact of everything that we've been fighting against for our people and you know that we're not going to be playing it safe anymore when it comes to our, our fights for policy. And so, while I think our, our passion isn't going to change and our drive isn't going to change, you know, if anything it's going to grow even more, I think the way we probably do our work will naturally change. I can see it being a little different and it makes sense because, I mean, the reality is like people are going to come out of this very, very traumatized. I mean, a lot of folks are probably not going to feel comfortable in a bigger space for a while. They may not feel comfortable

meeting one-on-one for a while. It, it might take quite a bit for people to get to the level of comfort that we used to be in and some folks may never be that way until we actually have a vaccine or something in place. And so I think it's now on us to, to really organize responsibly and do as much digital as we can uhm and to really respect that, uhm you know people, even when we reopen, people are not going to entirely feel safe to, to return to the way it used to be and it really probably shouldn't be so I think it's probably going to be a lot more digital sort of centred work. Uhm, I wouldn't be surprised if more jobs start working from home more often now uhm and if there's more emphasis on that uhm, I'm hoping that there can be more emphasis on uhm, kind of labour rights. You know, making sure that there's paid sick leave that there are you know uhm, that people are making liveable wages and things of that nature. So I'm hoping the work culture and the work uhm, the work infrastructure that our society has put in place here really dramatically shifts. Like, I'm hoping that's one thing that at least within the work style comes out of it is that we learn how to, to really work better for ourselves and for our people and how do we uhm guarantee the rights of, you know, of labour and, and paid sick leave, even health and you know health insurance not being tied to our jobs and stuff like that. So those are some of the things that I'm hoping, but I do expect naturally that things are going to change. I will be, I will be surprised if anyone thinks it will honestly return to normal because I think like any moment and in history, uhm we've gone through something that's very impactful and significant uhm and very traumatic for a lot of people and so it's going to take time to really rebuild but also to find out what will work moving forward, keeping that in mind.

G: Okay, thank you. Uhm, that was thank you so much that was all the questions I had. Do you have anything else that you want to talk about?

M: Uhm, no. Those are all like really, really great insightful questions. Some of them, like the COVID thing, I hadn't honestly verbally talked about in quite a while. So it was good to just kind of be able to, to think about it. So thank you for, for reaching out. I really loved the conversation, it was great to just kind of uhm, I guess kind of reflect on community leadership and, and also the work that we all do.

G: Thank you so much. I love like you clearly are very passionate about your work and love your community and I love that so much. That's why I'm sorry, I deviated from some of the questions, but I was just very curious.

M: I appreciate it.

G: But thank you so much for your time. Really. Uhm, I also like so I'm not from San Diego and you did give me a lot of an insight of the community here. So thank you a lot for that.

M: Yeah, thank you for, for doing this. It's exciting to hear that this work is being done. Uhm, and that UCSD is it like really working with it as well. So that's, that's super exciting.

G: Yes. I also think when I saw this course I was like this is so different from whatever I've done before so. Uhm, so now I'm gonna, uhm I will transcribe this interview and I will send it to you I think uhm next week. And so if there's anything you want to uhm modify from you that you can you can work like I'll send you to document and you can work on it before I uhm I turn it in. Uhm, so that is going to be a thing.

M: Okay, yeah, that works. I, I gave you a lot of props. I've transcribed like hour-long stuff when I was in college and that stuff takes forever. So I give you props for actually transcribing.

G: Thank you, it's gonna be a learning experience I guess.

M: Yeah, and if there if there is there anything that maybe doesn't come through in the audio as well. Feel free to also reach out to me. I'm sure I can fill it in. Uhm, I remember what I was talking about as well.

G: Okay. Thank you so much. Uhm, I guess that's all I have for today, but thank you so much for your time. I really appreciated it a lot and for all the insight on San Diego.

M: Oh Thank you. Thank you so much. And I hope you have a good day and a good week-end.

G: And thank you, you too. Have a good weekend.

M: Bye.

