

Ricardo Almodovar

2020-07-20

RICARDO ALMODOVAR: Okay.

LIZ BRADBURY: Now I'm going to turn my audio backup record on too. And --

RA: I hope I'm camera-ready.

LB: You look terrific; you look good. And it's really good; the lighting is really good, you're in a good place, that's great. So I'm going to read you this stuff. I have to be sure that my [drink?] (inaudible). With this project, Bradbury Sullivan LGBT Community Center and the Trexler Library at Muhlenberg College will collaborate on forty years of public health experiences in the Lehigh Valley LGBT Community collecting and curating local LGBT health experiences from HIV/AIDS to COVID-19. My name is Liz Bradbury and I am here with Ricardo Almodovar -- I spelled your name wrong -- Almodovar. Is that right?

RA: Almodovar. Almodovar.

LB: Yup, there we go. To talk about his experiences in the Lehigh Valley, in the Greater Lehigh Valley, Scranton-Stroudsburg [00:01:00] area, LGBT community during this time of COVID-19 pandemic as a part of the Lehigh Valley's LGBT community archive. We're meeting on Zoom on

Monday, July 20th, 2020. So, thank you so much for your willingness to be speaking with us today. To start, can you please state your full name and spell it for me?

RA: Yeah, sure. My name is Ricardo Almodovar, R-I-C-A-R-D-O, Almodovar, A-L-M-O-D-O-V-A-R.

LB: Okay, and can you please share your birth date?

RA: My birthdate is November 15th, 1989.

LB: Could you say the last word again, because it disappeared?

RA: Oh, November 15, 1989.

LB: Okay. Let's see. Okay, and [00:02:00] what town are you in?

RA: I currently live in Lancaster City.

LB: But, when I'm taking this picture of you, you are in Lancaster?

RA: Correct.

LB: Okay, so that's fine. So, because there's a part that says where are you, and where is the interviewee, so I wanted to know where that is. So this part is the consent part, so I'm going to read you this stuff. Do you consent to this interview today?

RA: Yes.

LB: Do you consent to having this interview being transcribed, digitized, made publicly available online in searchable formats?

RA: Yes.

LB: Do you consent to the LGBT Archive using your interview for educational purposes and other formats, including films, articles, websites, presentations, and other formats we may not even know about today?

RA: Yes.

LB: Okay. Do you understand that you will have 30 days after the electronic delivery of the transcript to review your interview, identify any parts you'd like to delete and/or withdrawn from your [00:03:00] interview, or you could withdraw the whole interview from the project?

RA: Yes.

LB: Okay. So this is just some identity things. What is your zip code where you are?

RA: 17602.

LB: Okay, and what is your age? I think you indicated that.

RA: I am thirty.

LB: Okay, and how do you identify with the LGBT community?

RA: I identify as a gay cisgender man.

LB: Okay, and here, so I already sent you some of the questions and stuff. We can really talk about whether you want. But one of the things we start out with is, in the place where you live, who is there with you, sort of quarantined or locked down or in that space?

RA: My partner and I.

LB: Okay, the two of you. All right, that's great. So are you working now?

RA: Oh, and in addition to that, actually, my brother [00:04:00] had COVID, and he's currently working on renovations with his house so my mother has been staying as well, so we have an additional room so there's three of us.

LB: Oh, I see. Okay, so are you working currently?

RA: Yes.

LB: Are you working at home, or at work?

RA: Yes. A little bit of both. So yeah, well my background is community organizing and Spanish language, and so I lived in Allentown for three years working for Make the Road, and then I moved out here. I just finished a fellowship with the DNC, the Democratic National Committee, and now I actually recently, as of tomorrow, I accepted a new role as an organizing associate with We the People, the project of the Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center.

LB: Oh that's great, cool. And so, and will you be working on that from Lancaster, is that the thing, or do you [00:05:00] have to go to Harrisburg to do that?

RA: Well, it is virtual; it is based in Harrisburg and so, I don't foresee traveling anywhere quite yet because of COVID. Everything is via Zoom, or Google Hangouts, or many of the multiple video platforms. But then, in addition to

my organizing work, I do work part-time at, I help out at a local shelter here in Lancaster called in the Transitional Living Center. And so, as an essential worker, we are there on-site providing front-line support for folks that are experiencing homelessness and trauma, including veterans, families, children, folks going through recovery. A two-unit building, and so 24-hour facility, and we [00:06:00] basically just man the front desk providing support and whatever they may need in that facility.

LB: Are you doing that now?

RA: Yup, just on the weekends though.

LB: Okay, is it hard to be social distanced and stuff in that kind of arrangement?

RA: So, folks aren't allowed visitors, so folks are to mostly stay in their rooms. The only areas that are shared are the common areas. We have two lounges, an adult lounge, a family lounge, and then a veterans lounge. And so they have to schedule that in advance with their case manager. We have case managers onsite that are licensed social workers that helps with budgeting, money management, house search, job search, and other issues, basically bridging that gap from homelessness to permanent sustainable housing; that's [00:07:00] the ultimate goal.

LB: Yeah. So, would you say that, have you come in contact with a lot of LGBT people there, or any?

RA: Actually, surprisingly yes. And they have program under Tabor Community Services and they have a very strong religious background.

LB: Oh, what's the program again, because I didn't hear that. Say it again? Community --

RA: Tabor Community Services. T-A-B-O-R. And so, they got a lot of heat, not necessarily recently, but over the years. And so, my partners, interestingly enough, he is there full-time while I'm only there part-time. And so he's openly gay, they know we're together and engaged. They're very open and supportive. And then we have another openly lesbian black woman who's also on staff. [00:08:00] And so the front desk staff which is who we are as program reporting assistants --

LB: You're pretty queer. (laughs)

RA: Excuse me?

LB: You're pretty queer, the front desk staff.

RA: Yes, yes, which is great.

LB: Yeah, it is.

RA: And so, they've been working on getting the participants' demographic much more diverse as well. We've had a few lesbian couples -- actually, not very many gay couples,

interestingly enough. But mostly, you know, women with their children. And they prioritize children, obviously.

LB: And with the veterans, are you seeing transgender veterans?

RA: That is a good question. Not that, and not any of that have been open.

LB: Okay. Because you know, transgender of [00:09:00] transgender women who are over sixty-five, one out of two of them, or fifty percent of them, are veterans. You know that?

RA: Yeah, I didn't know that.

LB: Amazing, isn't it? But it's really true, particularly from the Vietnam era. So if you come in contact with a transgender woman who is over sixty-five, chances are very high that she's a veteran.

RA: Oh, wow.

LB: It's a one-in-two chance. So if you do come in contact with somebody and since you're giving services for people who are trans, or who are veterans, and you know, if they say to you that they're transgender, or you recognize it, maybe, you recognize that they're trans, and they're over sixty-five, chances are really good that they're a veteran.

RA: That's interesting, I never really thought --

LB: Yeah, it's remarkably true, actually. And that's, as a result of that, it means that a lot of [00:10:00]

transgender people over 65 are getting healthcare from the VA. And it sounds --

RA: Yeah, that makes sense.

LB: -- pretty good. It's not the worst possible circumstance for them, so that's true. Not as good now as it used to be, but you know, it's not terrible; it's not a terrible situation.

RA: Yeah. It's just tough because Lancaster, when it comes to the nonprofit world is heavily controlled by religious organizations and institutions. I mean it's really common across the board when it comes to nonprofits. And that's not like a judgment or a critical call or anything; it's just, you know, as long as their beliefs don't infringe on our rights.

LB: Right, right, right. It's not necessarily a bad thing; [00:11:00] it's just that when they use their religious exemption to not be supportive, that's the dangerous thing. So we have religious organizations here in the Lehigh Valley too, as I'm sure you know, that are fine. They're fine. And other ones who will say, well because we're a religious organization, we're not going to support gay people, and it's interesting, or trans people. It's interesting that in Allentown's law, it specifically says that if an organization gets money from the city, it

doesn't matter what their religious circumstance is; they can't just go against the Allentown nondiscrimination law. It's actually written into the law, so yeah. So you were saying that, did you say your mother is in your house?

RA: Yes.

LB: Yeah, and is [00:12:00] she there because it's safer for her, or just because your brother is working on the house?

RA: Both, both reasons. He is also in the military, and actually, since they're renovating the family house, I actually lived there when I was in college before I moved to Allentown. In fact, I left that household to move to the Lehigh Valley, and then my partner and I moved back for work. And then in that, I guess, somewhere in that timeframe, my brother decided to renovate the house. He realized one problem led to the other, and was like, let's just tear down the whole thing, except for the bare bones, which is pretty much what the house was. And then he was staying with my father, and he ended up contracting COVID through his work, sadly. And his experience was terrible; he was under a ventilator for two weeks. [00:13:00] The whole family was terrified of what would happen. And mind you, there was no way to visit, so I'm basing this on virtually. Thankfully that happened, you know, in about two months ago, and now he's been almost a month out of the

hospital. And, but you know, with my mom being here, I feel like she's in a safer place, and she undergoes dialysis; she's diabetic, so she's already immunocompromised; she can't risk it enough as it is.

LB: Wow, so that's amazing stuff. Does your brother know how he got it? Were there other people in his workspace that were sick? Was that the circumstance?

RA: It wasn't my brother; it was my father that got it.

LB: Oh your father, yeah.

RA: From his job. And he's on the verge of retirement; he's a long-time [00:14:00] labor worker. He's worked in factories all over Lancaster County mostly, and so I guess the company wasn't moving fast enough regarding some of the safety protocols regarding COVID, and he ended up getting it. Thankfully, they were able to pay him throughout this whole process, and now they're taking precautions but it's like from the very beginning, a lot of companies and businesses and even organizations were very skeptical about the gravity of the situation and how serious it was.

LB: Wow. Had he had other kinds of conditions that made him susceptible to it, or --

RA: He's diabetic.

LB: Perhaps how old he is?

RA: He was born in 1960, [00:15:00] what would that be?

(laughs)

LB: He's sixty. I already know that because of when I was born, so.

RA: Okay. (laughter)

LB: This is a birthday year for him.

RA: Yes, he just turned sixty actually, the 13th a few days ago.

LB: Oh, there you go. Okay. So did he have some kind of existing condition that caused him -- I mean, just people over sixty are at risk; I know --

RA: Yeah, that, and he was diabetic, and he suffers from high blood pressure, but that's about it.

LB: I don't know that those things necessarily make you that much more susceptible to COVID, but wow, that's a terrible thing. And did it happen fast? Or you know, did it just, oh, I have a cold or something like that? I haven't talked with any of the people who were so close to somebody who was sick, so I'm sort of probing.

RA: Yeah, so it just happened, you know he came from home one day [00:16:00] scared and saying really bad chest pain and lack of breath, really. And so he called up his doctor, and they advised him to just stay home. So he stayed home for a while, he couldn't work, he couldn't go anywhere. Then it just got worse and worse. I would say after a week, they

finally had to rush him to a hospital. And they had to put him under a ventilator, tubes going up both nostrils. Very painful procedure. (laughter) At least from what I heard. In our family, we've been communicating via, or through video, both from WhatsApp and Facebook Chat. And so, you know, it's sad to, you know, see someone, you know, especially a parent, under such pain [00:17:00] and having to deal with, you know, something like this, and being under a ventilator for not just one but two weeks, over two weeks, actually, two weeks and about two days or something like that. A very long time.

LB: Yeah, but he's okay? Relatively okay now, I'm guessing?

RA: Yes, he's a firecracker. He's been wanting to like get back to normal lives right away. But you know, his health has to come first, and he has to, you know, take things easy; he can't breathe as well as he used to, and plus he was a smoker. He quit about ten weeks ago.

LB: Wow, yeah.

RA: So he's much better. I wouldn't say he's fully recovered; I'd say --

LB: It took a long time to get better.

RA: Yeah, and they say that COVID-19 could have caused permanent lung damage.

LB: Oh yeah.

RA: But we haven't noticed, or rather, it's too early to tell whether [00:18:00] it is going to cause --

LB: Yeah. Does he seem -- is he scared about going out and stuff? Does he think that he's safe now because he's had it, or does he fear that he's, it's interesting because sometimes people can say you could get it again and..

RA: Yup. So he's been pretty much enclosed in his house. He lives with his wife, and my brother now with the renovations and so, it's just one big happy family right now. So at least he's not by himself; at least he has people he can talk to. I don't know, who stares, video chat, and (inaudible), you can make a quick phone call. So it's not completely isolated, but sadly I haven't been able to see him in person quite yet, but I know hopefully soon, you know, I've been trying to take the lip precautions. I can't imagine if I were to, you know, [00:19:00] go visit, and you somehow I'll bring it over and my mom gets it.

LB: Awful, wouldn't it be terrible.

RA: Yeah.

LB: Yeah, so everybody that I've spoken to, I've spoken to a lot of people, their biggest fear, and I'm going to ask you what your biggest concern is but it sounds like this is what your biggest concerns it too, is that for people that are your age, that they're going to get it and then give it

to somebody. There's a lot of young people, I mean, a lot of young people are at risk. I just was talking to somebody who knew of a young person who had really serious contemplations, and they were younger; they were twenty. But their biggest concern is, you know, getting it and giving it to someone in their family, so that the loved ones ,and I would guess it sounds like one your concern is too.

RA: Yeah, right, because so many people are asymptomatic, and I don't know [00:20:00] if I may be or who knows if I have it now? But my mom wears her mask every day. Like I've mentioned, she undergoes dialysis three times a week. They won't let her on the bus unless she wears a mask, potentially through a program she gets from transportation to and from the dialysis clinic. And she comes back just fine, and I'm sure at the clinic, she gets her treatment done, they go above and beyond with making sure that everything is sanitary.

LB: Yeah, it seems like they're working very hard to do, in places like hospitals and stuff are really safe, and in comparison to other places that you might have to go to, like have you been to other places where you didn't feel so safe?

RA: Yeah. [00:21:00]

LB: I don't know. What do you --

RA: Well, Lancaster is -- and I'm sure it happens, you know, in Allentown. So we have our city council members and our mayor who wants to keep businesses closed for health reasons, and they're majority Democratic and progressive, whereas our county commissioners are Republican and want to open businesses back up. The state government, Rachel Levine and Tom Wolf want to close businesses, or leave them closed, whereas the federal administration want to open up businesses, and so all these levels, and there's so much confusion, and thankfully with the work that I do, I'm been trying to clear up some of those misconceptions and let folks know that, you know, we have to take the steps in order to protect ourselves and our loved ones whether we have it or not. And that is beyond politics. [00:22:00]

LB: Yeah, well it's wonderful to hear you say that; it makes me feel hopeful. (laughs) So, do you have other friends that you're talking to? You know, are you talking to other people online, or have a circumstance where you can see people social distanced? Or what do you think about that?

RA: Yeah, and so I, like I said, we live here; this is our little house, this is our backyard. We have a nice little setup here. We have our little fireplace there, I have my little plant there, there's my car. I've been growing some

tomatoes and some basil. I try to grow carrots, tomatoes.

Or not tomatoes, I do have tomatoes, other vegetables, and they didn't turn out well, they ended up --

LB: Didn't get any carrots?

RA: But what happened?

LB: We have a big vegetable garden, so you didn't get any carrots, they just didn't make it, is that the thing?

RA: No, well I tried to germinate them [00:23:00] or put them in the little cup and let it grow slowly. But we had one really bad rainstorm, and I should have just brought it in, and they just drowned. So I had cucumbers, carrots, green peppers, and so on. Now I just have basil, tomatoes, and I actually, interestingly enough, have done orange plants or mandarin plants. (laughs) I found I have somewhat of a green thumb, I guess half a green thumb, because I have much more experience with indoor plants. I have about seven, eight indoor plants right now, and somehow, I found a sprout growing out of one of them. Mother-in-law's tongue I guess is what it's called. (laughs) And it had --

LB: Which is kind of a politically incorrect thing to say.

There are other names for that which I think we should think of, and I can't remember what [00:24:00] it is. But it's more Latin, like a Latin designation, like the Latin, because really it's kind of rude. But (laughs).

RA: Yes. Anyway, I found this sprout growing out of that plant, and I planted it in my -- I don't know if you can recognize it, it's right here. It just grew out of it, and my friend told me to just pick out a leaf and smell it to see what it smells like. And it smells like citrus.

LB: Well there you go. Well that's great.

RA: So it might be, I'm assuming it's an orange, but who knows?

LB: Yeah, well once they grow, that's beautiful. So by the time that grows at the end of the season, you can dig it out and bring it inside, and it'll be lovely. Great.

RA: Yeah. So I've been using this time to do some more planting. This is the first time I ever started to garden, [00:25:00] and it's not huge; it's not impressive quite yet, but that's just, you know, one little pot that I've been trying to work.

LB: Sure, yeah. It's a good time to do that; I think that growing things like that makes you feel really much more in control of the world. You know, there's something about that, that if you can eat something from your garden, you feel really like, okay I got this. (laughs)

RA: And I'm looking forward to it.

LB: Well that's great; that's so great that you're doing that. So, you're saying that you're inviting people over and they

can stay farther away, or your family can (inaudible) or something like that?

RA: Yeah.

LB: That's great.

RA: And my mom wants to spend time with other relatives, so sometimes, she'll go to my cousin's house, for instance, to help babysit. And [00:26:00] so, you know, when it comes to family, like we like to remain close. But other guests, not so much, like acquaintances, we like to keep a distance.

LB: Yes. It's tough, but I think that there, you have to do a certain amount for your family to make everybody feel like there's cohesiveness I think, there's no question. So you have a partner so I'm not going to ask you about -- I have a question on here that talks about dating apps. So I don't know whether you're using that or not, but I'm not going to ask you anyway, since you have a partner, and I'm, you know, making my moral presumption on that. Let's see, so in terms of you being worried about the virus, do you have illness, you know, like preexisting conditions that worry you, or are you more concerned about other people around you [00:27:00] or what do you think?

RA: I don't have any preexisting conditions. I'm more so worried about other relatives, and other people, particularly folks that are more susceptible like older

folks or immunocompromised folks. So for the most part I am fine, but it's selfish of me to not take the necessary precautions (inaudible).

LB: Right, right. What, when you're working with the people who are at the place where you're volunteering for and where your partner is working full-time, are you seeing people that are sick there, or are they indicating that they're knowing about people who are sick?

RA: Well, we have not heard any reports of anyone getting coronavirus or any of them saying that they knew someone, which is great; it's good news. No news is good news. But we have, you know like I said, we have, we were trying to mitigate [00:28:00] further infection by having these policies like no visitors. We have an electronic thermometer to test every person every single day. We also have hand sanitizer, and a lot of these items are either donated or provided by the org.

LB: Yeah. What's the most frustrating thing, do you think, that's happening for you? How are you the most frustrated?

RA: I think it's, I would say the most frustrating is just the uncertainty of the situation right now not knowing, or the unknown. And that creates a lot of anxiety for other people. I'm not an anxious person. (laughs) I would say for the most part I'm stress-free. I believe there are so many

alternatives to dealing with stress and [00:29:00] anxiety. You know, I practice my own person of, I guess, a makeshift-type yoga and meditation almost every single day, and I'm very blessed to have, you know, the love and support of, you know, friends and family members, and even, I feel like now I've been trying to take action more than ever, you know in addition to helping out at TLC, I've also applied for grants for a community action project. And they're helping to fund initiatives to not just help TLC, but work on highlighting the needs of low-income communities, and in addition to TLC, Crispus Attucks, and it's a black-owned organization focused on equity and inclusion and they have a food bank every week [00:30:00] and they provide these folks in the southeast of the city, which is the most condensed and racially-diverse part of the city. And so through this grant, I was able to purchase carts, pushcarts for folks to use for necessary items, and work with a graphic designer to produce a video to let folks know that there are people who are going through a difficult situation, whether it's having to go to a foodbank, or being homeless. And what you can do to take part, whether that means donating food, or Crispus Attucks does need, you know, people with muscle, folks that can help back these boxes, and I myself have packed, I would

say at this point, hundreds of boxes. [00:31:00] in the last few months. You know, they give out every, like I said every week, every Wednesday at that, at least 300 boxes. It used to be where folks would have to come in and show their ID, but now it's just, that food is provided to the Central PA food bank at no cost, without any, you know, folks just, take your food, take what you need. If you can't use it, then pass it along to your neighbor. And so my goal was to not just provide those pushcarts to help out folks, but to also highlight those needs and what folks can do to take action.

LB: So, is there a TLC in Easton?

RA: I couldn't tell you. I think I've heard of something (inaudible) --

LB: Is that a whole thick --

RA: -- but they're not affiliated.

LB: Is it, oh it's not affiliated, okay, because it sounds like they have a similar program with [00:32:00] the food distribution and stuff.

RA: Well that's through Crispus Attucks; TLC is the shelter.

LB: Oh, I see. So is TLC a network across the state? Or one that's called TLC in Lancaster?

RA: Correct, correct. And it's through Tabor Community Services, and they've been in existence for over thirty

years. It used to be an old hotel; it was called the King Douglas Hotel in Lancaster City, and so a couple purchased the building and just converted it into a shelter for those experiencing homelessness in the mid-eighties.

LB: Oh, there you go. Looks pretty interesting. What --

RA: It's a little unique.

LB: It is, although I think that that happens to hotels, or you know, places that have multiple rooms like that that are harder to figure out what to do with [00:33:00] when they're older. So you've just described your mental health as pretty good; you sound like you're in pretty good shape as far as that goes.

RA: Yeah.

LB: Are you getting exercise, or do you just normally have exercise from your job?

RA: (laughs) Well I am lucky because I live walking distance to Lancaster County Central Park. And they have amazing hiking trails. The Conestoga River crosses right through the park. And so I hike at least four times a week, I would say, at least. And especially in the summer where it's nice. Even if it's hot out, just put on a pair of shorts and t-shirt, sneakers, good to go.

LB: Good for you; that's great that you're getting the exercise.

RA: For sure. And then what also motivates me to do that is that, I recently signed up for a leadership cohort through the Lancaster [00:34:00] Clean Water Partners. It's like a year program regarding leadership development and how to take collective action for clean water, sustainability and conversation in Lancaster. It's a grant they were provided through Penn State and the Lancaster Conservancy. Like I said, it's the Clean Water Partners. It's a partnership, and so we meet monthly. We used to meet in person, but obviously we had to transition to Zoom. And so, I've always wanted to do sustainable work and conservation, and I love the environment, and you know, learning about what's being done in Lancaster, and what I can do to, you know, help to take collective action for clean water, is one thing that I'm passionate about. And going out to the park and [00:35:00] also participating in this leadership cohort, you know, makes me more appreciative, not just, you know, mentally, but also emotionally, and even physically, for that matter.

LB: So what's involved with the Leadership? It's a program that is helping you to do, attain leadership skills? Or it's providing you as a leader? How does that --

RA: Kind of both. So each session is different. We had a county tour, for instance, where we visited local water treatment

facilities. And then another one, we also visited a water sewage treatment facility, and what is being done for water quality. You know, we all drink water, we all take showers, or at least we would hope, so. But where does that water go? How is it treated? And even what businesses are doing with that water. For instance, what are beer distributors [00:36:00] or brewers doing, because they heavily depend on water quality. Water in Lancaster is going to be different from water in the Lehigh Valley or even across the country in California, and so depending on your recipe and what the water is made up of, that'll change the flavor of not just beer, but products if you're a business owner.

LB: How clean is the Conestoga River?

RA: Not very clean. (laughs) From what I learned, less than twenty percent of the rivers and streams across Pennsylvania are up to par when it comes to the statewide standards regarding pollution and contamination.

LB: And is that also because of upriver dumping, or is it coming from -- I'm just fascinated by this; it doesn't have anything [00:37:00] to do with COVID.

RA: That's fine.

LB: I wanted to know if that, you know, in places where I've lived, a great deal of the pollution comes from storm water overflow, or it comes from runoff from fertilizer.

RA: Farms, yeah.

LB: Or farms, or it comes from grass fertilizer, where particularly in suburban areas that clog -- that cause the algae to bloom and grow because they're fertilizing this algae that shouldn't have all this artificial fertilizer, and it clogs, it looks awful actually.

RA: Yeah, and not just that, but you know, we have fracking going on in Pennsylvania, and that's a huge issue. And most recently, Maryland is suing Pennsylvania for not taking steps to mitigation pollution and contamination, and it's affecting Maryland's livelihood, [00:38:00] particularly around the water, or rather the fishing industry and crabbing industry.

LB: Yeah, so it's running through the River Susquehanna and the --

RA: Oh my goodness, over forty streams and rivers empty out into the estuary in the Chesapeake out into the Atlantic Ocean.

LB: It's got to go someplace; that's where it goes.

RA: Yeah. (laughs)

LB: Ugh, it's terrible. So, I'm glad that there are people that are looking after that; that's very, very [important?]. It's, yeah. And you know, it's interesting that where I grew up, which was a quite affluent area of Connecticut,

the whole east coast along the Long Island Sound was totally fouled by the fact that people put so much fertilizer in their grass, and then weed killer too, [00:39:00] that it's just like, you know, and people think oh, it's so beautiful here, and everything, it's like yeah, you just killed everything.

RA: Right, exactly, and I always say, and I keep repeating myself, you know, the work that we do, or our future depends on the work that we do now, and there is no plan B. If we don't save our environment, then you know, and I would say that it's one of our most, not just important, but pressing issues around the globe.

LB: Yeah, that's definitely true. I have a very good, very, very close friend who's from Morocco. What happened? Oh, there you are. (laughs)

RA: I just saw a notification; I had to close it off, yeah.

LB: Oh, who's from Morocco, and another friend of ours went to visit her in Morocco, visit her [00:40:00] family, and they went to the part of the sea there, part of the Mediterranean that's there, that comes up to the coast, and the entire beach area and everything was completely unusable, just completely, just devastated, like you couldn't even, like the worst, horrible pollution that you could even imagine. You couldn't even put your foot in it,

you know? And it's a beach; the beautiful beach area. But it's just totally fouled, and what we're doing in the United States is exactly the same. It's just, well, you know, it doesn't matter, we'll just do it a little bit more, and we'll just me, and we have that, we have no leadership that is stopping that from happening. Let's talk a little bit about Black Lives Matter, because I don't think we can talk about COVID-19 without talking about --

[00:41:00]

RA: Sorry, I just had to say bye to my partner. Say hi.

LB: Bye!

IAN: Bye!

LB: Have a good day.

IAN: Nice to meet you, I'm Ian.

LB: Nice to meet you.

RA: He has to get going to work.

LB: What a nice beard.

RA: Yeah, he starts at four.

LB: Oh. What did he say? I didn't hear him.

RA: Oh, what am I going to do to get the car. I'll get the car later on. Sometimes I drop him off, but it's fine.

LB: Oh. Do you own your house?

RA: We don't, it's a rental.

LB: Because it's old.

RA: What?

LB: Your house looks like, just from those bricks, it looks like it's from the 1800s.

RA: I wouldn't, I couldn't tell you. We would love to buy a house. Sadly [00:42:00] as LGBT people of color it's a little more difficult. And plus we want to do more traveling. Maybe in my mid-thirties, I just turned thirty. Or rather, I'd be thirty-one in February, so I'm in no rush to buy a house.

LB: Yeah, it's just as well. Things are a little uncertain right now; it's probably not a good idea to make that kind of choice.

RA: Yeah, that's --

LB: Other people are saying it's a great time to buy and sell a house. I don't know why that is, but they're saying that. I think it's because people are paying so much attention to their houses right now because they're stuck in them. So, I'm really seeing that. But I was going to say that I don't think that we can talk about COVID-19 without talking about the current political situation and Black Lives Matter, so let's talk about Black Lives Matter a little bit, you want to say some things about that.

RA: Yeah, so my partner is black and Puerto Rican. Very strong African roots in his family. [00:43:00] Very strong

Caribbean, indigenous, and even Spanish roots. His whole family speaks Spanish, and he's been highlighting that intersection of Latinx and black communities and LGBTQ+ folks, and he falls in all of that. (laughs) And so we've been fighting for black lives for years. I remember when Joey Santos was shot and killed in front of Dorney Park years ago, and here we are fighting the same fight. But we believe that black lives do matter, and that we need to push for comprehensive, not just reform, but you know, the whole system needs to change, it needs to be dismantled. You know, but that's going to take a lot of work.

[00:44:00] We need to be bold; we need to be brave. But at the end of the day, know that we're in this together, and if your liberation is bound with ours, or rather, what is that quote? They always say, if you're here to help me, you're wasting your time, but if your liberation is bound with mine, then let's do something together. And I wholeheartedly believe that. And here in Lancaster, and even in the Lehigh Valley most recently with the officer that put his knee on a black man's neck -- yeah, you would think that the cops would learn, but you know, there's no negotiating with white supremacists and racists, especially when they are used to the power, and they oftentimes abuse it. And we even see it within the LGBTQ+ community, the

[00:45:00] reason why we have pride is because the police raided Stonewall fifty-one years ago, and trans, brown, and black folks decided to fight back against that abuse of power and police brutality. And here we are, we're still fighting police brutality and abuse of power.

LB: Yeah, there's no question, that was just a few blocks from my house where that happened with the police officer. I've worked with the police before and I'm not surprised by that happening, and I'm not surprised by them already dragging their feet with regard to what (inaudible), and then they did it. And then they said, well not this time. And I'm not surprised that they released a nine-minute video that happened to be from a CCTV across the street, and that nine-minute video, I don't know if you've seen that, the longer video, is actually goes, the police officer [00:46:00] when he's first handcuffing your guy with the other people after they've thrown him to the ground, after they've kicked him to the ground, which is what he did, he said, the police said that he fell down, but then you can see that that's not true at all, they kicked his feet out from under him and pushed him to the ground. They're trying to handcuff him and the guy kneels on his neck. But then, but people say well, you know, but then, about two minutes later after he's been handcuffed completely there the

police are no longer touching him, and the police officer says something to him and he raises his head up about an inch, and the police officer knees his head right back down into the ground again. And he's handcuffed, there's absolutely, you know, so even the ridiculous sort of excuses of the first action, there was no excuse for the second action. Absolutely assault; it's against this person who was completely [00:47:00] unable to move at all, and then to have a police officer do that. And it's a terrible situation because I think that, you know, it's based on white supremacy but it's also based in police power. Those two things are so closely related. But there are also a lot to do with the training of the police which causes anybody who's a police officer to feel like (inaudible) it's even if they're not white, frankly. And working with guys who are unbelievably scary.

RA: Yeah, and the police enforcement has a long history of discrimination and brutality and if you look at its inception, you know it was born to, out of a need within the white community to capture escaped slaves. And you can see [00:48:00] some of those roots, or remnants are still, you know, still exist, whether people realize it or not.

LB: And then, people will say that the militarization of the police started during the civil rights movement in the

1960s. You know, these people have rights; now we're going to have to have the police officers to have machine guns and AK-47s, and dogs, and stuff like this, which actually, it was a different kind of attitude in the earlier parts of, where every police officer didn't carry a gun, for example. Most police officers didn't carry a gun, and in other countries where police officers don't carry guns. So.

RA: Yeah, I don't carry a gun, and I don't feel safe around someone that carries a gun. There should be no reason why you need a gun around at all whatsoever.

LB: Yeah, I think that's true, and I think that people [00:49:00] really put themselves at risk if they advocate to proliferate arms. It just makes it scarier and scarier. I don't think that helps anything. I do think that the rapid action to marching and protesting and speaking out and photographing and talking about it is a very positive thing that I've been seeing; I'm very excited about that.

RA: Yeah, it seems like folks aren't just waking up, but you know, they're having these very difficult conversations, including you know, religion, anything LGBTQ+, and you know, these are, and politics, and these are things that you don't talk about at the dinner table.

LB: Yeah, I don't think many people -- I mean, I've talked to a lot of people; I have to say that, I haven't interviewed

[00:50:00] anybody who said, yeah, I'm not wearing a mask, and I think that, you know, I don't interview people like that because I'm not interested in reaching out to that population, but also, I'm only interviewing people who are part of the queer population, and frankly, I'm not coming across a lot of people in the queer community saying, yeah, go ahead and kill everybody, I don't care, as long as I'm alive; I'm just not finding within our own community. There are people but not people who are going to talk to me, because they know I'll [yell at them?]. So, you know, I know that there are people who want to get back to work. And I was just talking, the last person I spoke to just before you was a person who's retired now, but he was a schoolteacher and he was talking about all the ramifications of sending kids back to school. And pointing out all sorts of reasons why that's just not going to work. He was talking about, he was a music teacher, and he came in contact with, of three schools, [00:51:00] with every single kid in a week, he would come in contact with every single one of those kids, and so his potential for spreading it himself to all of those people, or having all of those kids in contact with him, he said, you know, if I were there, I'd get sick; how can I not? I'm coming in contact with, you know, 800 kids.

RA: Oh my goodness.

LB: And you know, it's only one kid. And he was also talking about, this is pretty interesting, he was talking about how most inner-city schools, and I'm sure this is true in Lancaster public schools too, they all don't have air conditioning. A lot of inner-city schools in Allentown are not air conditioned, or only parts of them are air conditioned. And even some of the more recently built buildings are not air conditioned. So as a result, they will take kids who are in rooms where it's very, very hot, and they'll take all the hot rooms and bring them down to the air-conditioned rooms. So now you don't just have one class of kid, [00:52:00] you have fifty kids. And how do you keep those kids from not infecting each other? Or you leave them in the room where it's one hundred and one degrees, or you bring them to a room where there's fifty kids, and a bunch of them have their masks down like this because they don't know how to wear them. So, it was really interesting what he said; I hadn't even thought about that. And he said, oh yeah, I think about that every day.

RA: Yeah, and then the whole, going back and forth right now, school districts don't know whether to open or close, and there's just so much controversy.

LB: Yeah, and it's really based in greed. I mean, the only reason to open schools is so that you can let parents go back to work so that they can do minimum wage jobs to support rich people. Because truthfully, you know, we need to be able to [00:53:00] -- parents need to be able to stay home with their kids right now. And yeah, they need money. But who really needs, you know? I was talking to one of the people I interviewed that has a daughter who has a congenital heart defect, and she was called back to work because she's an essential worker because she's a waitress; she's a food service person, where she makes below minimum wage and the restaurant wasn't using precautions. There were people that were sick there, and her mother said to me, if she gets sick, she's going to die. But if she doesn't go to work, she's going to lose her job. Because they told her, if you don't come to work, it's your resignation. She said, but you're not -- nobody's got a mask on here. I'm coming in contact with all these people, you know, particularly wait staff because people who are eating are not wearing masks. So, and [00:54:00] you know, this is not somebody who's making \$300,000 a year as an essential worker. The most essential workers are the ones who don't make any money.

RA: Yeah, minimum wage jobs.

LB: Yeah, yeah. Warehouse workers, talk to people who are warehouse workers, and the dangers in their circumstances are very, very high. So okay, I think you were covering most of the stuff. So you seem to be in pretty good shape, I have to say, Ricardo, that you're the most stable person I've talked to, the last eighteen people.

RA: Appreciate it.

LB: And you're giving me a great deal of hope. What other things give you hope about right now?

RA: What gives me hope is, oh my goodness, that's a big question. (laughs) What gives me hope is the prospective of a better [00:55:00] future, that we'll get over this pandemic, that we'll be able to live full, authentic lives, and that finally we're highlighting black lives, but also trans lives and LGBTQ+ lives, and that we're highlighting that intersection and the need to lift those voices. And just because a group is gaining more rights doesn't take away someone else's. (laughs) That's not how --

LB: We're not rationing rights.

RA: Yes, yes. I never understood that rationale. But what gives me hope is that we're putting in the work, that we're taking collective action, that I'm meeting with so many organizations, so many leaders on the ground, or rather on the computer (laughs) doing amazing things from virtual

workshops, training sessions, [00:56:00] webinars, community forums, and building relationships with legislators, people that are decision-makers, and building those relationships with their constituents, and that's part of the work that I'll be doing too.

LB: Are you finding some positive things from people who are in the statehouse and stuff? I mean --

RA: So the statehouse is majority Democratic; however the state senate, not so much. So we're having some trouble, and I recently met an open queer person of color, Malcolm Kenyatta from the Philadelphia area, and he's been championing COVID relief and raising the wage, and talking about, you know, the hypocrisy within [00:57:00] the Republican Party, and highlighting that it's not a political issue; it's a human issue. It just so happens that Republicans time and time again are trying to take away our healthcare, and they don't want to pay it. And sadly, they have the wealth, they have the representation, and the power, and so we want a more evenly distribution of that wealth, and we'll do that at any cost necessary, or rather, any means necessary.

LB: I think it's true, you know, people have often, and I've been fighting for equal rights for the LGBT community and other communities for my whole career, and for years and

years and years, and a long time ago, when we were fighting to pass the anti-discrimination ordinance in the city of Allentown, [00:58:00] which was the first passage that included gender identity in the state; nobody else had gender identity anything, not Philadelphia, anything, it was just Allentown. The effort to pass it started in 1998, and we were successful, and finally successful in 2002.

RA: Congratulations.

LB: Thank you. And then after that, I mean there were only six communities that had nondiscrimination laws; Lancaster was one of them, and Lancaster interpretively, the city of Lancaster interprets as inclusive of gender identity as well. But it didn't say gender identity in the law. So once we passed it in Allentown, now we have fifty-six, fifty-eight communities that have nondiscrimination laws that includes sexual orientation and gender identity. But it's still only a third, really a third of the state. But the thing that somebody told me way back then, and I think this has always been true, and I've read this in a variety of circumstances, no matter what disenfranchised group you're talking about, you cannot [00:59:00] compromise for basic civil rights. You shouldn't do that, because the bottom line is, so people were saying to me when I was leading that effort to pass that law in Allentown, we had

to add sexual orientation and gender identity into an existing law, and what they said, people were saying, just do sexual orientation, because gender identity's too edgy. And my response to that is, look, you know, our enemies would deny us oxygen if they could. And there are people in the statehouse of the state of Pennsylvania that would do that. They would just deny us oxygen; they'd deny us the right to live in the state. And so, if they would deny you oxygen, they're not going to be satisfied with a compromise. And you shouldn't be either. Don't compromise, because you know, this is just a question of basic civil [01:00:00] rights, the right to housing, the right to employment, the right to healthcare, the right to economic distribution, the right to education, all of those things are just regular things. It's what every American, every person in America should be able to presume is their right to have, and it is; it is.

RA: Yeah, in college, sorry to cut you off, you just reminded me of the Maslow's hierarchy of needs, right? And if you take care of our basic needs first, we can continue up the ladder to potentially self-actualize, or self-realize. The main issues are, imagine how much our communities could thrive if we had guaranteed housing, quality education, clean air, clean water, clothing. All of these issues that

are basic human necessities, if they were guaranteed to all of us, how much [01:01:00] further along when it comes to progress and development could we be in ten, fifteen, twenty, one hundred years down the road? But because folks, you know are apprehensive to change or they just don't care enough to create that change --

LB: They're incredibly short-sighted. It's short-sighted (inaudible) because if you have a living wage, a living minimum wage, it improves and makes a robust economy; it just does. So if you're looking at it purely from the viewpoint of greed, which is often the other side's viewpoint, pretty much it's the entire viewpoint, it's incredibly short-sighted to say, well we're not going to spend the money to give this population, this worker population a living wage because it will come out of our pockets. But it [01:02:00] really doesn't, because if you pay people living wage, frankly, that's the whole basis of capitalism. Now you have people, even one of the most dastardly capitalists in the world, Henry Ford, who started Ford cars and changed the whole circumstance, he said, I want to produce a car that my own employees could buy. And so, you know, it has to be a good, cheap thing, and I have to pay them enough so that we can continue this American project which is based in capitalism. Capitalism has become

this enormous seesaw of the incredibly rich and the incredibly poor, and the poor are the workers. And one thing we've totally seen about COVID-19 is without people who are making minimum wage, everything [01:03:00] grinds to a halt. We can't do anything you know? Now you have to spend millions of tax, billions of tax dollars to just make it so that this population is still going to be able to come back to work when things open. I mean, that's speaking from a totally greed basis, which is a terrible basis to look at anything. But it's ridiculously short-sighted to say, well we're not going to pay you, but we want you to buy our computers. Or we want you to buy food in the grocery store. But we're not going to give you any money to do it. Well, that's not going to work. You know, and we also know that corporations, or companies that are justice-based will actually do that and it doesn't hurt their profit margin at all. [01:04:00] Like Costco, or Ben & Jerry's or something like that who just pay a living wage. They pay a living wage, and they pay their workers, and they pay for their worker's healthcare, so what comes out is a real sense of support. You know the workers themselves have a sense of loyalty to their employer, and they work hard, instead of thinking, well, they don't care

anything about me. You know, it's just a bad circumstance; it always comes from greed.

RA: Exactly, and they're the same ones that want to bust unions, and intimidate workers from former unions. And unions have a long history of creating change. That's the reason why we have a 40-hour workweek, or why we don't have children working in factories anymore, and why we have benefits, or why we have vacation [01:05:00] time and all of these other benefits. And then you have folks who don't realize how important unions are, and because it's so anti-capitalist and more people-oriented, bosses and the rich are intimidated by the people, by unions, because ultimately, or rather at the end of the day, you can have a million executives, but if you have not one worker, what's the point?

LB: Right, it's really true. Well you're certainly right about that; it's been a joy talking to you, as I'm so pleased to be able to do that. So the last part of this, you know, that we're hoping somebody people will be looking at these videos, 30 or 40 years, you'll still be around.

RA: (laughs) I hope so.

LB: Of these, well I'm sure you are. Look at how healthy you are. And I want to [01:06:00] give you an opportunity, and I want to encourage you to give a message to those people

that are looking at this video sometimes in the future and say, you know, something about now, and you know, something that's sort of positive for them to think of. What can you think of that you would say to something --

RA: Yeah, sure. So things might look a little stark; we're in the middle of a global pandemic. We have constant rioting, we have violence. But in the midst of all that, there is good, there is love, there is support, support for black folks, for LGBTQ-plus folks, for folks in the Latinx community, for refugees, for folks that are disabled. We're all in this together, and it's July 20th, 2020, but I hope that when you see this video, things are much better, and [01:07:00] I know that, you know, with the work that we're doing now, we can together collectively develop policy solutions for some of the major problems we're facing, not just today, but hopefully, by the time you see this, these problems will be long resolved.

LB: I hope so.

RA: But again, we're in this together, and we just have to stay persistent. We have to keep pushing, and we have to lean in. We have no other option. We can't sit idly by, and the time was yesterday, but at least there are people doing it, and we're doing it boldly, courageously, but we're not alone. Like I said, we're in this together.

LB: Yeah. Well thank you very, very much for talking to me and taking an hour and a little bit more out of your day to do this. I really [01:08:00] appreciate it very, very much and everybody who will see this will appreciate it as well. And I love everything you said, and you give me a great deal of hope, so thank you for doing that. And I appreciate it, so what you'll get a transcript of this, and as soon as they're finished transcribing it, we send them to another college and they fix that, and then they give it back to us, so thank you again, and have a great day, and have a great weekend. Keep up the good work.

RA: Yes, great. Thank you so much for inviting me, and I hope we stay in touch, and I'm sure we'll cross paths again soon.

LB: I hope so. Okay, bye-bye.

RA: All right.

END OF AUDIO FILE