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University of California
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Aaron Mair

*Aaron Mair: Sierra Club President 2015-2017,
on Heritage, Stewardship, and Environmental Justice*

Sierra Club Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Roger Eardley-Pryor, Ph.D.
in 2018

Portions of this interview are sealed by Aaron Mair until January 1, 2045.

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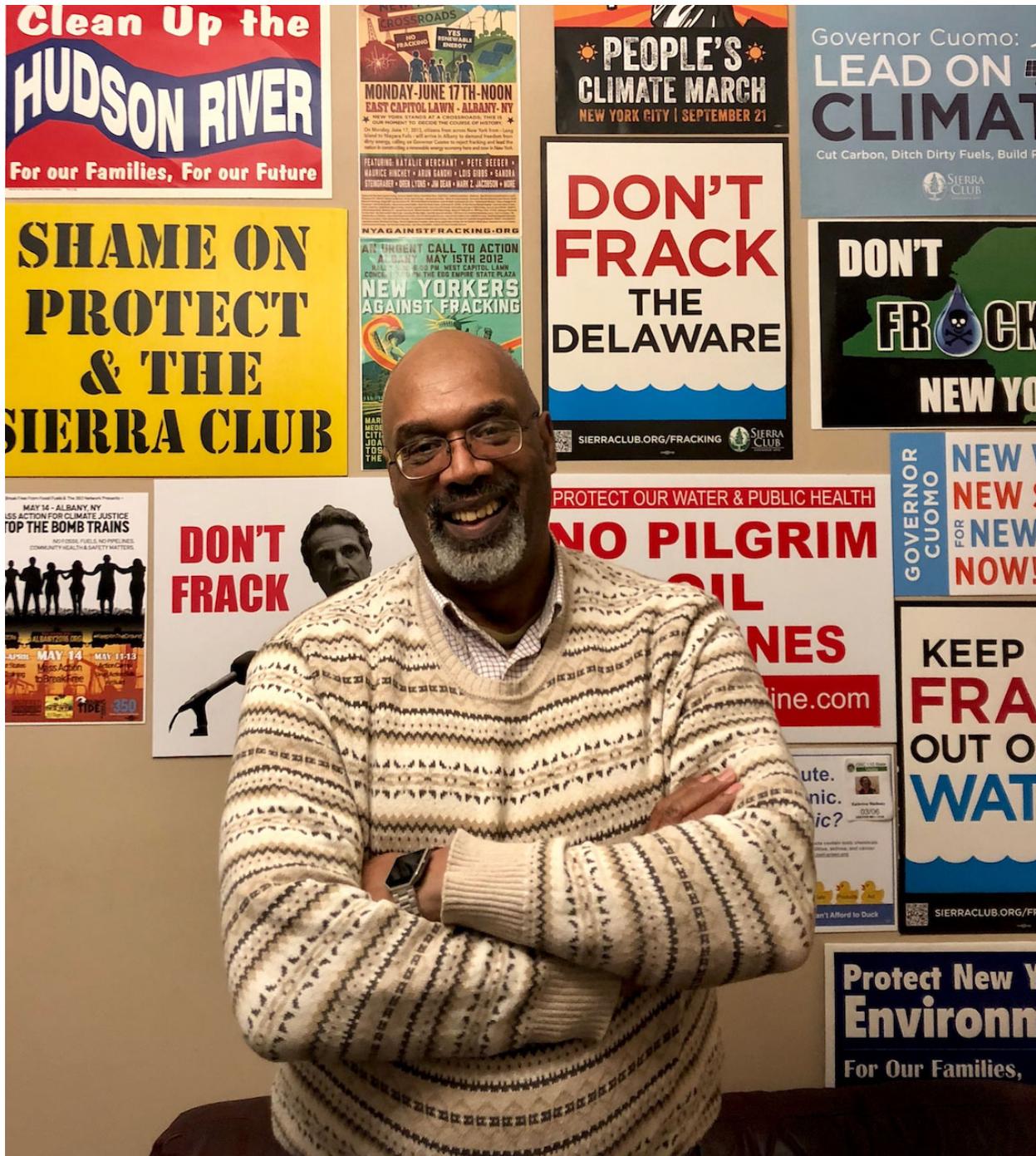
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Aaron Mair at the Sierra Club's office in Albany, New York, November 2018.



Aaron Mair and oral history interviewer Roger Eardley-Pryor at Mair's family homestead near Traveler's Rest, South Carolina, November 2018.

Abstract

Aaron Mair is a leader in the environmental justice movement and was elected as the 57th president and first African-American president of the Sierra Club from 2015-2017. Mair was born on November 27, 1960, and grew up in Peekskill, New York. In 1984, Mair earned a Bachelor of Arts in History and Sociology from the State University of New York at Binghamton University, which included studying at The American University in Cairo, Egypt. Mair trained at Rhode Island's Naval Education and Training Center, and in 1988, he departed from SUNY Binghamton's Political Science Doctoral Program to work for the New York State Department of Health in Albany, where he is currently an epidemiological-spatial analyst. In 1998, after a decade-long campaign that closed the toxic ANSWERS (Albany New York Solid Waste to Energy Recovery System) solid waste incinerator, Mair won a \$1.4 million federal Resource Conservation and Recovery Act settlement with New York State, which he used to create two nonprofit environmental justice and community service organizations. After joining the Sierra Club in 1999, Mair held leadership positions at every level: in the Hudson Mohawk Group of the Atlantic Chapter; as chapter chair of the Atlantic Chapter; as chair of the National Diversity Council and of National Environmental Justice and Community Partnerships; as an elected member to the national Sierra Club board of directors in 2014 and in 2019; and as president of the Sierra Club from 2015-2017. Mair has four daughters, three with his first wife, and one with his current wife. In this oral history, Mair discusses his genealogical research into his family's ancestry; his childhood along the Hudson River; his education; his career with the New York State Department of Health, including as a 9/11 emergency responder; his three-decades of work in the environmental justice movement; and his two-decades of leadership in the Sierra Club, particularly on issues of equity, inclusion, and justice.

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Appendix: Documents and images courtesy of Aaron Mair

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Interview History

By Roger Eardley-Pryor, Ph.D.
Interviewer and Historian
Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley
April 2020

Aaron Mair practices what he preaches about laying strong foundations through family and faith, about empowering people to help heal the planet, and about building bridges to better bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice. I learned this through Aaron's oral history, which you have here; but more so, I experienced it throughout the bustling week Aaron and I shared while video-recording his oral history—first in South Carolina and then in New York. That week with Aaron in November 2018 included some one of the most enlightening, enjoyable, and dynamic experiences in my life as an oral historian.

On the day we first met in person, Aaron walked me through an unkept graveyard in South Carolina where his mother's enslaved ancestors are buried. A few days later, we walked through snow across the Helderberg Escarpment that rises above the Hudson Valley in New York, near where Aaron has lived most of his life. As Aaron informed me, the Helderberg Escarpment is the site where, over 150 years earlier, a Southern slave-owner named Joseph LeConte studied geology with Louis Agassiz and nurtured notions of scientific racism. Joseph LeConte later became a geology professor at UC Berkeley and co-founded the Sierra Club alongside John Muir in 1892. Nearly 125 years later, in 2015, Aaron Mair became the Sierra Club's 57th president and its first African American president.

For his Sierra Club oral history, Aaron chose to conduct his first interview sessions in Pickens County, South Carolina, in part to connect his family's heritage of enslavement, emancipation, and environmental stewardship there to the life of Sierra Club co-founder Joseph LeConte. Aaron and I completed his final oral history sessions in Albany, New York, where Aaron shared more of his own life story, his involvement in the environmental justice movement, and his varied experiences with the Sierra Club. In many ways, Aaron's life history, and that of his family, reflect the Sierra Club's own increased awareness and historical evolution to better incorporate equity, inclusion, and justice in its environmental efforts. In the process of telling these stories, Aaron welcomed me to his family gatherings, took me to church, drove us through the streets of New York's capital, and showed me various sites from his many years of community activism. At the end of that extraordinary week—and after an epic final interview session—I returned to California with my heart full and my mind expanded, feeling inspired and privileged for the experiences and perspectives Aaron shared with me.

Another thing I learned while planning Aaron's oral history is how he takes seriously the "active" part of being an activist. Aaron's busy schedule includes his full-time job as an epidemiological-spatial analyst for the New York State Department of Health; his full-time work as a local and national activist; and his commitments as a father and a husband. After a few attempts, I discovered we would not communicate extensively via email. Rather, Aaron and I pre-planned his interview sessions over the phone. One time, Aaron answered my call just after his appearance on Radio Kingston with Jimmy Buff (Warren Buffet's son), where they discussed

resiliency, diverse ways to unite ecology and equity, and Aaron's environmental justice campaign to remove toxic PCBs from the Hudson River. Another time, Aaron answered my call from Albany's rush-hour traffic while returning home to his wife and then-ten-year-old daughter. And shortly before we met in person, Aaron answered my call from a campaign celebration for helping to elect Antonio Delgado as the U.S. Representative for New York's 19th congressional district.

Throughout our few phone conversations, Aaron remained convinced that, in order to best conduct his oral history, he and I needed to visit together the places he would talk about during his interviews; that is, both in northwestern South Carolina and in Albany, New York. Given these disparate locations, Aaron and I often spent our phone time synchronizing complex travel plans and confirming our use of various interview sites—including at the Hagood Mill Historic Site nestled at the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in South Carolina, the place where Aaron's genealogical research revealed his maternal family was enslaved. I'm so grateful Aaron shared his story and these places with me. As you will read, the power of place became an important theme throughout Aaron's oral history.

I asked Aaron by phone what I might read to help me prepare for his interview. First, Aaron suggested his own excellent article, "A Deeper Shade of Green," which he published on the Sierra Club website in March 2017 near the end of his Sierra Club presidency. In it, Aaron noted how "the dynamics of race, political power, and wealth have been used to disempower and deny Americans of color from equally sharing, shaping, and benefitting from our country's environmental heritage." Aaron also sent me a YouTube link to his keynote lecture for the symposium on "Ruderal Ecologies: Grounds for Change" at The Sanctuary for Independent Media on April 14th, 2018. For its importance in the environmental justice movement, and for Aaron personally, he recommended *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites* (1987), written mostly by Charles Lee for the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. And to better understand the city he calls home, Aaron endorsed *O Albany!: Improbable City of Political Wizards, Fearless Ethnics, Spectacular Aristocrats, Splendid Nobodies, and Underrated Scoundrels* (1983) by William Kennedy.

Interestingly, Aaron also suggested I read *When the World Ended: The Diary of Emma LeConte (1864-1865)*, which covers the Civil War experiences of Joseph LeConte's daughter in South Carolina. For a flavor of this work, one section of Emma LeConte's diary is titled, "Hurrah! Old Abe Lincoln has been assassinated!" Finally, Aaron suggested *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) by W. E. B. Du Bois, and writings by Wendell Berry, especially *The Hidden Wound* (1970) in which Berry, as a white Kentuckian, examines his deeply embedded inheritance of racism and its connection to land and work. In it, Berry wrote, "If the white man has inflicted the wound of racism upon Black men, the cost has been that he would receive the mirror image of that wound into himself." Berry also wrote in it, "I should understand the land, not as a commodity, an inert fact to be taken for granted, but as an ultimate value, enduring and alive, useful and beautiful and mysterious and formidable and comforting, beneficent and terribly demanding, worthy of the best of man's attention and care." Both of the ideas in Berry's quotes appear in various ways throughout Aaron's oral history.

Aaron and I finally met in Traveler's Rest in Pickens County, South Carolina, on Saturday, November 10, 2018, after flying separately—he from New York, and I, the day prior, from California. (The story of me forgetting my wallet and identification before my early-morning bus ride to San Francisco's airport, yet somehow still getting myself and my luggage with video-recording equipment on a cross-country flight to Greenville, South Carolina using only my UC Berkeley staff ID is, I realize, a testament of my white privilege.) After receiving my wallet from my wife's gracious (and expensive) over-night airmail to Traveler's Rest, I drove to pick up Aaron at the home of his cousin, Hattie Estella Green, an incredible and loving woman whom Aaron affectionately calls Cousin Stella. Later that night, after our emotional and powerful day of interviewing at the Hagood Mill Historic Site, I dropped off Aaron back at Cousin Stella's house. But before my car left her driveway, Aaron came running out saying Stella insisted I join them for a late dinner, and importantly, that she was not someone whose insistence would be denied. That evening, Stella treated us all to delicious fried fish and savory vegetables while she shared more family stories. These stories included her experiences of racial segregation in rural South Carolina, her family's sacrifices for her to earn an education, and her eventual migration to New Jersey where, after earning her Master's degree in Education, she spent a career as an elementary school principal before retiring on her family's homestead in Traveler's Rest. Being there in South Carolina, with Aaron and with Cousin Stella, helped me to understand through experience the importance of heritage in Aaron's life, which proved to be another theme throughout his oral history.

Aaron insisted his first South Carolina interview session occur at the Hagood Mill Historic Site in Pickens County, which required a good deal of planning but proved to be potent. Information about the Hagood Mill, both on site and online, proclaims its historic and still-functioning gristmill was constructed in 1845 by James Hagood, who, according a historic marker on site, was a "planter and merchant" and served in the South Carolina House of Representatives. That mill was almost certainly not built by Hagood but by his enslaved laborers, which included Aaron Mair's ancestors. The Hagood Mill's construction occurred shortly after the birth in 1844 of Zion McKenzie, Aaron's great-great maternal grandfather whom, as Aaron had recently discovered through deep genealogical research, was enslaved by the Hagood family. Yet we found zero mention, on site or on the Mill's website, about the Hagood family's history as slave-owners. I found the whitewashing at this historic site disturbing. No mention of the human slaves who built the Hagood family's wealth and influence? I suppose my surprise at this overt absence speaks to my own naiveté and privilege. As I've learned, such whitewashing is not unusual, particularly in that part of South Carolina. My visit later to the Hagood family's historic hotel site in Caesars Head State Park would prove similar.

The staff at the Hagood Mill welcomed us warmly, and in their gift shop, I purchased a bag of buckwheat flour milled on site. Billy J. Crawford, the director and historian of the Hagood Mill Historic Site, had arranged for Aaron and I to record in one of their buildings with electricity—a large structure fabricated around a sizeable rock that displays ancient petroglyphs etched by Native Americans several centuries earlier. Aaron already knew Billy Crawford from coordinating the McKenzie-Mair family reunion in 2017. That year, soon after Aaron found archival evidence that the Hagood family owned and enslaved his McKenzie ancestors, Aaron worked with Billy to host a large McKenzie and Mair reunion at the Hagood Mill Historic Site. I found an article from August 2017 in the local *Sentinel-Progress* newspaper titled "A Bittersweet Homecoming" about Aaron's archival confirmation that the Hagood family enslaved his own

family. Regarding his upcoming McKenzie-Mair reunion at the mill site, Aaron was quoted saying, "This is a chance for us to heal from what happened to our family, for closure. ...But it's also a chance for us to highlight a piece of history that no one really likes to talk about." Aaron continued: "There's no marker at the mill for the slaves that built and ran it. There's no mention of the Black men, women and children that helped to raise one the area's most influential families to prominence. ...That's a mistake, and a dangerous one at that. You have to create that dialog and try to explain the unexplainable. You have to be open to receive, atone and account for this legacy." Beginning Aaron's oral history at the Hagood Mill seemed another attempt to correct that mistake and account for its legacy.

However, before Aaron and I began recording that first session, he wanted to show me another unaccounted legacy of his family's history on site. Together, we visited the 'slave section' of the Hagood family cemetery, an unkept area directly next to the well-maintained Hagood family cemetery. In contrast to the Hagood family's ornate sarcophagi, replete with Confederate crosses and bounded by a wrought-iron fence, the graves of Aaron's enslaved ancestors were barely noticeable among the fallen leaves. They were marked only by unhewn river rocks set slightly askew as nameless headstones. In that moment, Aaron spoke with deep solemnity about the generations of lives lost to slavery, about its ongoing aftereffects, and about the power of public memorials, especially the impact of what is not memorialized. Aaron then pointed to a nearby collection of large stones stacked against a tree to form into a roughshod alter. He named the alter as the site of the first Golden Grove Church, the later iterations of which Aaron and his family still attend today. Aaron spoke then about the importance of faith for many enslaved people and offered up a prayer before we returned to the Hagood Mill's petroglyph building to begin Aaron's oral history. Much of Aaron's first interview tells the story of his enslaved ancestors' emancipation from human dominion to their sustainable stewardship of the land where Cousin Stella's home and the Golden Grove Church still stand. Those stories about Aaron's ancestors helped to contextualize his own conceptions of environmental responsibility, which later inspired Aaron's pioneering work in environmental justice and his leadership within the Sierra Club.

The next morning, just before church on Sunday, November 11, 2018, we recorded Aaron's second interview session in Cousin Stella's home. Much of that second interview, like our first, focused on Aaron's ancestors, but this time on his paternal family's immigration from Jamaica to Harlem, New York. We ended that interview a bit early to attend Sunday services at the Golden Grove Baptist Church just down the road. Before services began, Aaron introduced me to Pastor Michael Beckett, Sr., who shared some of the Golden Grove Church's history, which stretched back to the nineteenth century and, in the twentieth century, included a racist firebombing that required its complete reconstruction. That Sunday service offered another unforgettable experience that helped me better understand Aaron and his family, too. Their congregation welcomed me, the only white person in the sanctuary, with warmth and grace, despite me not being a Christian. And to my surprise, the power and beauty of the Golden Grove choir twice brought me to tears. Pastor Beckett's call-and-response Southern Baptist sermon was so impassioned with singing, shouting, and sweating that, by the end of it, we all could have used his towel to wipe our own foreheads, too. After church, Cousin Stella invited me back to her home where Aaron and other family members gathered to cook and share lunch, including freshly fried green tomatoes. Talk about Southern hospitality! Once again, Aaron and his family made me feel like I was part of theirs. The entire experience filled my heart with gratitude.

Aaron flew back to Albany, New York that Sunday afternoon, but my flight to meet him there would not depart until the following evening on Monday, November 12, 2018. Aaron very much wanted to conduct his second South Carolina interview at Caesars Head State Park visitor's center, some 3200 feet above sea level atop the Blue Ridge Escarpment that overlooks the Mountain Bridge Wilderness Area. But between church, family visits, and Aaron's flight home, we just couldn't make time to record there. However, on the Monday morning before my evening flight up to Albany, I met Norm Sharp, a local Sierra Club activist whom Aaron connected me with and who joined me on a visit to Caesars Head. Norm and I learned at the state park's visitor's center, which I later confirmed in the *National Geographic Guide to the State Parks of the United States* (2008), that the land at Caesars Head originally belonged to the Cherokee nation, was "relinquished" to South Carolina in 1816, and was purchased in the mid-1800s by Colonel Benjamin Hagood, the family patriarch who owned and enslaved Aaron's ancestors. The Hagood family—or rather, their slaves, which is to say, Aaron's family—herded livestock up the mountain in spring to avoid summer heat. The Hagoods hosted so many visitors there that they—that is, Aaron's family—built and operated a resort hotel on site for elite whites from other "planter and merchant" families. As with the Hagood Mill Historic Site, Aaron hoped to record his oral history at Caesars Head to highlight the essential yet unmentioned role that his enslaved family played in that land's history, which, Aaron noted, included an early site for ecotourism. Instead, the historical documentation and images that Norm and I found in the Caesars Head State Park visitor center celebrated a whitewashed narrative of the Hagoods and their hotel with no mention of the Black families forced into servitude there. Just as Aaron foresaw, my experiences in Pickens County helped me understand and appreciate the importance of recording Aaron's oral history in South Carolina where he shared these untold stories.

Aaron and I next met in Albany, New York's historic Arbor Hill neighborhood, where we recorded his final three interview sessions, one each evening on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, November 13-15, 2018. For our first session in Albany, Aaron arranged for us to record at the Arbor Hill Development Corporation, a community-focused organization that Aaron often collaborated with during his many years of activism there. While Aaron now lives nearby in Schenectady, he lived for many years with his first wife and daughters in the majority Black neighborhood of Arbor Hill. A block or so over from Arbor Hill Development Corporation, Aaron pointed out the ominous smokestacks rising up from what once was the ANSWERS (Albany New York Solid Waste to Energy Recovery System) solid waste incinerator. Aaron's decade-long battle to stop the ANSWERS incinerator from spewing toxic ash onto his family and community changed his life. During Aaron's interview that evening at the Arbor Hill Development Corporation, I wondered if his ability to endure the battle against the ANSWERS facility, and the many campaigns that have come since, came from his formative experiences in high school as a long-distance runner. But without question, Aaron's success against the ANSWERS plant launched his career as an activist for environmental justice, which then sent him along a bumpy trail to eventually become president of the Sierra Club in 2015.

Appropriately, Aaron and I recorded his final two interview sessions at the Albany headquarters of the Sierra Club's Atlantic Chapter. Roger Downs, the Conservation Director of the Atlantic Chapter, graciously lent us his own office to record in. There, Aaron shared stories of his intellectual awakenings in college, the beginnings of his civic and environmental activism in Albany, his pioneering work in the environmental justice movement, and his more-than-twenty-years of effort to help the Sierra Club build bridges across the civil rights, labor rights, and

environmental rights movements. Roger Downs's office, with its walls covered in Sierra Club campaign posters, made an excellent backdrop for Aaron's stories. After our interview session on Wednesday night, Aaron drove me up the street through his old neighborhood in Arbor Hill, past his first home, to the Field of Dreams recreational facilities he helped create for Arbor Hill's underserved children, including his own daughters. Aaron became a mentor to many in his community, thereby paying forward the mentoring he received from people like Jack Burns, Mike Urell, James Geschwender, Jim Petras, John McClendon, Reggie Knox, Barbara Allen, and others. Aaron became active on so many issues in Albany that it proved impossible for us to record all those stories. But the patterns I saw in Aaron's activism in Albany included reclaiming open space for public use, demanding equal treatment by law, ensuring his community's political voice was heard, fighting toxic pollution, and seeking just recompense from those who've done wrong.

Around noon on Thursday, our final day together, Aaron met me in the Helderberg Mountains just outside of Albany during his lunch break. A light snow blanketed the ground as we walked across the escarpment and looked over the Hudson Valley. The rock and fossil records at the Helderberg Escarpment are so extensive and well-exposed that the site became pivotal to the study of North American geology in the early nineteenth-century. Even from England, Charles Lyell—the foremost geologist of that era—read closely new research on these rocks just outside of Albany. When Charles Darwin read Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-33), it helped Darwin conceive of evolution as a slow process in which small changes gradually accumulate over time. Aaron told me how his youngest daughter loved geology and, when traveling as part of his Sierra Club and environmental justice activism, he often brought home unique rocks for her growing collection. After all, Aaron does travel quite a bit as an activist.

Aaron also reiterated how, in the mid-nineteenth century, Joseph LeConte—a co-founder of Sierra Club in 1892 and a former slave-owner from South Carolina—conducted geological research at the Helderberg Escarpment with Harvard geologist and white supremacist Louis Agassiz. While crunching white snow under our boots, Aaron and I spoke then about the misuses of science, like phrenology, and about similarities between nineteenth-century scholars who vehemently advocated scientific racism, like Agassiz and LeConte, with those who, today, dangerously deny anthropogenic climate change. We also reflected on ways that societies, laws, institutions, and individuals evolve over time. More than once that week, Aaron suggested how his recent presidency of the Sierra Club, when contextualized by his own life and heritage—including his family's history of enslavement and emancipation—signified a kind of evolution for the Club, perhaps for the broader environmental movement, and perhaps beyond. We both hoped so, but only time will tell.

That evening, just before beginning Aaron's last interview session, he drove me to other sites in Albany that were central to his efforts for environmental justice. We visited the building at 200 Henry Johnson Boulevard, which, Aaron told me, was constructed with a Community Development Block Grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) back when New York's current governor, Andrew Cuomo, worked at HUD under President Bill Clinton. After Aaron helped shut down the ANSWERS solid waste incinerator in 1994, and in the wake of Aaron's \$1.4 million federal Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) settlement with New York State in 1998 due to damages from the ANSWERS facility, Aaron used that settlement money to create two nonprofit community service organizations

initially located at 200 Henry Johnson Boulevard: Arbor Hill Environmental Justice Corporation, and the W. Haywood Burns Environmental Education Center. Through those organizations, Aaron became a prominent voice in the environmental justice movement, particularly in his efforts in the Clean Up the Hudson campaign that resulted in a settlement between EPA and General Electric to dredge toxic PCB sediments from the Upper Hudson River.

For our next stop, Aaron brought us to the old ANSWERS solid waste incinerator itself, which was intended originally as an environmental solution: it would turn trash into electric energy for the large buildings at the Empire State Plaza on Capitol Hill, where Aaron worked. That evening, when Aaron and I arrived, smoke still billowed from its tall smokestacks. Thanks to the efforts of Aaron and many others, like Emily Grisom and Ward Stone, those fumes were no longer the toxic remnants of burned trash. The facility had converted to a gas-fired power plant. As such, most of what we saw billowing was water vapor—along with regulated amounts of nitrous oxide, sulfur dioxide, mercury, and, of course, as with any fossil-fueled facility, significant and unregulated amounts of carbon dioxide. If not clean and renewable energy, at least the plant was no longer spewing toxic trash-gas, and, in lieu of the Sierra Club's prominent campaign, at least it had moved Beyond Coal. Standing at the site with Aaron helped me understand why Arbor Hill fell victim to the ANSWERS plant's poisonous ash: the facility sat low in a hollow, snuggled between Capitol Hill to its south and Arbor Hill to the north. As Aaron explained, Albany's prevailing north wind patterns blew the toxic ash from those tall smokestacks directly onto homes sitting on Arbor Hill. Aaron's campaigns against toxic pollution were, like those of many environmental justice activists, battles of survival for him, his family, and his community.

Most the stories Aaron shared with me, both on and off the record, were unknown to me. The unique circumstances for Aaron's interview found me deeply engaged as a listener while recording but, at times, feeling it was inappropriate to interject and steer the direction of Aaron's narrative. As a result, by the time we began Aaron's final interview session that Thursday night, we had far too much to discuss for a single, standard two-hour interview session. We hadn't even addressed Aaron's time as Sierra Club president yet, one of the purported purposes of his Sierra Club oral history! The final interview session Aaron and I shared proved to be epic. We recorded a heroic seven-hour interview session that ended sometime around two in the morning, just a few hours before I departed New York and returned to California. To our surprise, when Aaron and I finally emerged from that intense interview experience, we found our cars completely covered in a batch of fresh snow. I helped Aaron clean off his Prius, and he helped me scrape snow from my rental car. With more snow accumulating, a stillness had settled over Albany. We bid farewell in that cold, quiet, early morning to end our extraordinary week of talk and travel together.

When I landed in San Francisco later that day, on November 16, 2018, the deadliest and most destructive fire in California's history, the Camp Fire, had already decimated the town of Paradise and, over the next week, continued scorching some 240 square miles of land, taking with it many people's lives and livelihoods. Ash from the enormous fire rained down on my wife and one-year-old daughter at home in Sonoma County, even though we lived more than 150 miles from the inferno. Smoke from the blaze made the Bay Area's air quality the worst of any place on the planet and rose to levels federally designated as dangerous. The unavoidable soot made me think of Aaron's efforts to stop the ANSWERS incinerator from raining toxic ash on his children. And it reminded me how his current campaigns in Sierra Club against climate

change are, in effect, efforts toward environmental justice for us all, but especially for our children and Earth's future generations.

Since that day, the process to edit and finalize Aaron's transcript for publication has taken time. Aaron received a copy of his lengthy interview transcript in the summer of 2019, but in addition to his regular responsibilities at work and home, Aaron was re-elected to the Sierra Club board of directors the prior spring. Aaron also received a health diagnosis that absorbed much of his mental and emotional energy that year, and he spent significant time that year helping care for his grandchild while his daughter was deployed for military service. Happily, in November 2019, one year from the week we shared in South Carolina and New York, Aaron traveled from Albany to Oakland for a Sierra Club board meeting. It provided him the impetus to complete his edits and gather photographs and documents for his appendix, and allowed us to meet again in person. At the Spice Monkey restaurant in Oakland, where Sierra Club board members dined with Finance Committee members and trustees of the Sierra Club Foundation, Aaron hand-delivered his corrected transcript and photographs. It was delightful, if brief, to reconnect, and equally good to see him as active as ever. Aaron reviewed his transcript carefully, correcting names and dates, and choosing to embargo a few sections of his narrative. The photographs Aaron provided and the documents he shared from his genealogical research supremely complement the stories Aaron told about his family and about his own life.

Aaron's life, and thus his oral history, is unlike any other in the Sierra Club Oral History Project. Here, Aaron revealed how his life experience and ancestry intersected with the Sierra Club's slow and evolving efforts around diversity, inclusion, and justice. His interview makes important and previously unrecorded contributions to the history of environmental justice via his years of activism and his eventual presidency of the Sierra Club. As such, Aaron's oral history takes seriously Sierra Club founder John Muir's admonition that "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe."

With the addition of Aaron Mair's oral history, the Sierra Club Oral History Project at The Bancroft Library includes accounts from well over one hundred volunteer leaders and staff members active in the Club for more than a century. Varying from only one hour to over thirty hours in length, these interviews document aspects of the Sierra Club's diverse activities and concerns over the years, including protection of public lands and wilderness areas; attending to the "explore and enjoy" aspects of the Sierra Club's mission through its robust outings program; safeguarding water and air quality; promoting sustainable energy and progressive climate policies; and working toward environmental justice. The full-text transcripts of all interviews in the Sierra Club Oral History Project, including this interview with Aaron Mair, can be found online at the Oral History Center website: <http://ucb.lib.link/OHC>.

The Bancroft Library also holds the archival records of the Sierra Club along with an extensive collection of Sierra Club members' papers. It is also the repository for the records and papers of many other environmental activists and organizations. The Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library, formerly called the Regional Oral History Office, was established in 1954. The Oral History Center conducts, teaches, analyzes, and archives oral histories on a broad variety of subject areas critical to the history of California, the United States, and our interconnected global arena. The Oral History Center is under the direction of Martin Meeker and the administrative direction of Elaine Tennant, director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Sierra Club Oral History Project History

By Roger Eardley-Pryor, Ph.D.

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Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library

University of California, Berkeley

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The Sierra Club and the Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley have a long-standing partnership for preserving the Sierra Club's past through oral history interviews. In 1970, amid an upsurge of environmental activism that produced the first Earth Day and codified a suite of new legal statutes, a collaboration arose between the Sierra Club, one of the oldest and most influential environmental organizations in the United States, and the Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library (formerly the Regional Oral History Office), one of the oldest organizations professionally recording and preserving oral history interviews. The resulting Sierra Club Oral History Project has, over several decades, moved through cycles of intensity and lull due to the availability of funding for recording and publication of interviews. Over the past half century, this ongoing collaboration between the Sierra Club and the Oral History Center has produced an unprecedented testimony of engagement in and on behalf of the environment as experienced by individual members and leaders of the Sierra Club.

Sierra Club volunteers helped conduct several interviews in the Sierra Club Oral History Project. But in its earliest years, as now, extensive and deeply researched oral history interviews with legendary Sierra Club leaders—like photographer and former director Ansel Adams, longtime directors and former Club presidents like Dr. Edgar Wayburn, or former executive directors like David Brower—are conducted on a professional basis through the Oral History Center by oral historians with expertise in environmental history.

Now fifty-years old, the Sierra Club Oral History Project continues to document the leadership, programs, strategies, and ideals of both the national Sierra Club and the Club's grassroots at the regional and chapter levels from the early twentieth century through the present. These interviews highlight the breadth, depth, and significance of the Sierra Club's eclectic environmental efforts—from education to litigation to legislative lobbying; from wilderness preservation to energy policy to environmental justice; from outdoor adventures to climate change activism to controlling chemicals; from California to the Carolinas to Alaska and beyond to international realms. The Sierra Club Oral History Project, together with the sizable archive of Sierra Club papers and photographs in The Bancroft Library, offers an extraordinary lens on the evolution of environmental issues and activism over the past century, as well as the motivations, conflicts, and triumphs of individuals who helped direct that evolution.

In 1969, two separate but related events stimulated the Sierra Club Oral History Project. In the summer of 1969, a fortuitous meeting occurred on a long bus ride from San Francisco to the dedication ceremony for the newly established Redwood National Park. The new and then-youngest Sierra Club president, Phillip Berry, sat next to Amelia Fry, an experienced oral history interviewer at what was then called the Regional Oral History Office of The Bancroft Library. Fry had conducted oral histories with former National Park Service directors and Berkeley

alumni Horace Albright and Newton Drury, as well as leading figures in California politics and natural resource management. On that bus ride north, Fry suggested preserving the Sierra Club's unwritten history through audio-recorded, transcribed, and publicly available oral history interviews with the Club's leading volunteers and influential actors. Both Berry and Fry understood how written documents like board minutes, memorandums, and membership records could not possibly capture the Club's complex past and ongoing story, especially amid its increasing complexity from rapid growth in the 1960s. Berry liked the idea of oral history interviews, given his deep appreciation for the Sierra Club's rich past, its momentous campaigns, and especially its human entanglements. After all, Berry's first Sierra Club presidency followed years of internal debate that resulted in David Brower's resignation as the Club's first executive director.

That same summer in 1969, Marshall Kuhn met fellow Sierra Club member James Rother while hiking in Yosemite Valley. Rother, then ninety-years old, shared his memories from the early twentieth century of hiking with John Muir, the famed preservationist and Sierra Club founder. Kuhn realized that, unless recorded, the reminiscences of Rother and other early Club members would soon be lost forever. That fall, Kuhn convened an ad hoc committee of Sierra Club members interested in preserving the Club's written documents as well as recording its unwritten oral histories. Kuhn's ad hoc group petitioned members of the Sierra Club Board of Directors, including Phillip Berry, who recalled his earlier discussions with Amelia Fry. In May 1970, one month after the first Earth Day, the board established a standing Sierra Club History Committee that initially included four former Club presidents and several former directors, with Marshall Kuhn appointed its founding chairman. That September, the board designated The Bancroft Library as the official depository of the Club's written and photographic records. With that, Kuhn and his committee focused on developing a significant Sierra Club Oral History Project.

Kuhn and the Sierra Club History Committee turned to Willa Baum, director from 1958 to 1999 of The Bancroft Library's Regional Oral History Office (now the Oral History Center), for advice and support. Baum, a nationally recognized authority in oral history, agreed to train Sierra Club volunteers in the art of oral history interviewing. For additional assistance, the Sierra Club History Committee also hired a professional consultant, Susan Schrepfer, an environmental historian and recent Ph.D. in history then working with the Regional Oral History Office and the Forest History Society. Schrepfer designed and mailed a six-page questionnaire to Sierra Club members who had joined the Club prior to 1931. More than half responded, which helped the History Committee identify several prospects for initial oral history interviews. The History Committee, in conjunction with the Oral History Center, selected additional interviewees (narrators) from the ranks of Sierra Club leadership over the prior six decades.

Beginning in 1971, Sierra Club volunteers from northern and southern California, along with oral history students at California State University, Fullerton, and at the University of California, Berkeley, initiated the Sierra Club Oral History Project by recording reminiscences of early Sierra Club members. In 1974, when Susan Schrepfer accepted a professorship at Rutgers University, Sierra Club History Committee-member Ann Lage began coordinating its oral history efforts. Lage, who earned both her bachelor's and master's degrees in history from the University of California, Berkeley, soon joined the staff of the Oral History Center, where she oversaw the Sierra Club Oral History Project until her retirement in 2011. Lage also co-chaired

the Sierra Club History Committee with her husband Ray Lage following the death of Marshall Kuhn in 1978.

In 1980, with considerable support from the Oral History Center, the Sierra Club sought and earned a sizeable grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to thoroughly document the Sierra Club of the 1960s and 1970s. By that time, the Sierra Club Oral History Project included thirty-five volunteer-conducted interviews, and the Oral History Center had conducted or was completing five extensive oral history interviews with Sierra Club leaders. Between 1980 and 1984, however, the NEH grant and matching funds from the Sierra Club Foundation made possible the completion of an additional seventeen professionally conducted oral histories and forty-four volunteer-conducted interviews, totaling over 250 hours of recorded history.

Following the NEH grant period in the early 1980s, the Sierra Club Oral History Project resumed a slower-paced routine, conducting interviews only as donated funding permitted. Between 1984 and 2019, trained Sierra Club volunteers contributed to The Bancroft Library eight new oral history interviews, resulting in two multi-volume collections published respectively in 1989 and 1996. Between 1992 and 1999, the Oral History Center conducted eight extensive Sierra Club interviews, three of which featured narrators previously interviewed. The pace of interviews slowed further in the twenty-first century. Between 1999 and 2018, the Oral History Center completed and published five new interviews for the Sierra Club Oral History Project.

In the Spring of 2018, a renewed collaboration between the Sierra Club and the Oral History Center restored life to the Sierra Club Oral History Project. Therese Dunn, the Librarian at the Sierra Club's William E. Colby Memorial Library, and Jim Bradbury, Communications Specialist with Sierra Club National, obtained fresh funding from the Sierra Club Foundation with hopes that the Oral History Center could conduct new in-depth interviews. That April, Dunn and Bradbury ventured to Berkeley where they met with Martin Meeker, the director of the Oral History Center since 2016, with Ann Lage, the retired oral history expert on the Sierra Club, and with me, Roger Eardley-Pryor, an interviewer at the Oral History Center with expertise in science and environmental activism. Since the bulk of Sierra Club oral histories conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Sierra Club, the nature of environmentalism, and the natural environment itself all experienced significant changes. In an effort to address those changes while complementing prior Sierra Club oral histories, our renewed collaboration agreed to continue long-form interviews with former presidents of the Sierra Club. Each year between 2018 and 2020, renewed funding from the Sierra Club enabled the Oral History Center to conduct two in-depth, multi-session, video-recorded oral history interviews with former Sierra Club presidents. All six new Sierra Club oral histories will record approximately ten-hours per narrator.

Now, as in the past, each interview in the Sierra Club Oral History Project is transcribed, lightly edited for clarity, and returned to the narrator for their review and approval to publish. Bound volumes of all narrator-approved interviews in the Sierra Club Oral History Project are deposited for research with The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and with the William E. Colby Memorial Library at the Sierra Club's headquarters in Oakland. A list of all published and forthcoming interviews in the Sierra Club Oral History Project follows this project

history. Since the early 2000s, these transcripts are also available online for free via the Oral History Center website: <http://ucblib.link/OHC>.

On behalf of the Oral History Center of the Bancroft Library, I want to thank all narrators who, since the early 1970s, shared their precious memories in the Sierra Club Oral History Project. We also thank the Sierra Club Board of Directors for recognizing early on the long-term importance of preserving the Club's history and its evolution; to the past members of the Sierra Club's History Committee, especially its founding chair Marshall Kuhn; to special donors who provided funding for individual Sierra Club oral history interviews; and to the Trustees of the Sierra Club Foundation for providing the necessary funding to initiate, expand, and more recently renew this oral history project. Much appreciation goes to staff members of the Sierra Club and the Sierra Club Foundation who helped make these oral histories possible, most recently and notably to Therese Dunn. A special thanks, too, to all prior interviewers, and most importantly to Ann Lage for her more than three decades of exceptional work on this project.

I remain both grateful and excited to conduct new oral histories with volunteer and staff leaders of the Sierra Club, one of the most significant environmental organizations in history. And I deeply appreciate the narrators who welcome me into their homes, who set aside significant time to conduct these oral histories, and who, in the process, share their meaningful memories of protecting the planet for all of us to explore and enjoy.

List of Interviews of the Sierra Club Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by the Oral History Center, University of California, Berkeley

Single-Interview Volumes

Ansel Adams, "Conversations with Ansel Adams," 1978.

Phillip S. Berry, "Sierra Club Leader, 1960s-1980s: A Broadened Agenda, A Bold Approach," 1988.

Phillip S. Berry, "Sierra Club President, 1991-1992: The Club, the Legal Defense Fund, and Leadership Issues, 1984-1993," 1997.

David R. Brower, "Environmental Activist, Publicist, and Prophet," 1980.

David R. Brower, "Reflections on the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, and Earth Island Institute," 2012.

Doris Cellarius, "Sierra Club Volunteer Leader: Grassroots Activist and Organizer on Hazardous Waste Issues," 2005.

Richard Cellarius, "National Leader in the Sierra Club and the Sierra Club Foundation, 1970-2002, Sierra Club President, 1988-1990," 2005.

William E. Colby, "Reminiscences," 1954.

Michael L. Fischer, "Sierra Club Executive Director, 1987-1992," 1997.

Richard M. Leonard, "Mountaineer, Lawyer, Environmentalist," 1975.

Norman B. Livermore, Jr., "Man in the Middle: High Sierra Packer, Timberman, Conservationist, and California Resources Secretary," 1983.

Aaron Mair, "Aaron Mair: Sierra Club President 2015-2017, on Heritage, Stewardship, and Environmental Justice," 2020.

Michael McCloskey, "Sierra Club Executive Director: The Evolving Club and the Environmental Movement," 1983.

Michael McCloskey, "Sierra Club Executive Director and Chairman, 1980s-1990s: A Perspective on Transitions in the Club and the Environmental Movement," 1999.

Susan D. Merrow, "Sierra Club President and Council Chair: Effective Volunteer Leadership, 1980s-1990s," 1994.

Laurence I. Moss, "Sierra Club President, 1973-1974, Nuclear Engineer: Energy and Environmental Policy," 2014.

Michele Perrault, "Michele Perrault: Sierra Club President 1984-1986 and 1993-1994, Environmental Educator, and Nature Protector," 2019.

Carl Pope, "Environmental and Progressive Politics: Sierra Club Executive Director, 1992-2010," 2014.

Doug Scott, "Campaigner for America's Wilderness, Sierra Club Associate Director," 2013.

Denny Shaffer, "Sierra Club Officer and Leader, 1970 to 1997: Focus on Membership, Finances, and Management," 2006.

William E. Siri, "Reflections on the Sierra Club, the Environment, and Mountaineering, 1950s-1970s," 1979.

Wallace Stegner, "The Artist as Environmental Advocate," 1983.

Gary J. Torre, "Labor and Tax Attorney, 1949-1982; Sierra Club Foundation Trustee, 1968-1981, 1994-1998," 1999.

Edgar Wayburn, "Sierra Club Statesman and Leader of the Parks and Wilderness Movement: Gaining Protection for Alaska, the Redwoods, and Golden Gate Parklands," 1985.

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Interview 1: November 10, 2018

01-00:00:02

Eardley-Pryor: Today is Saturday, November 10, the year 2018. This is an oral history with Aaron Mair, the former president of the Sierra Club—

01-00:00:11

Mair: Fifty-seventh president.

01-00:00:12

Eardley-Pryor: The fifty-seventh president of the Sierra Club. My name is Roger Eardley-Pryor. I work at the Oral History Center at the University of California, Berkeley in the Bancroft Library. We are at the Hagood Mill Historic Site in Pickens County, outside Greenville, South Carolina. Aaron, to begin the oral history, could you tell us the date that you were born, your birthday?

01-00:00:32

Mair: Yes. I was born November 27, 1960, in a place called Valhalla, New York. They had just transitioned to Peekskill Hospital. All my siblings were born at Peekskill.

Hospital with the exception to me. I was born in Valhalla. And so, it's a place that is on the Hudson River in northern Westchester, in the beautiful Hudson Highlands.

So, I tell a lot of my friends and brothers and sisters in the environmental movement that I have always lived in the wild open spaces and grew up in the wild open spaces, but some of the best wild open spaces in the country. And so, as a kid in the Hudson Highlands, I knew why Rip Van Winkle snored. It's the land of Washington Irving, the land of imagination, and a wonderful place to have grown up.

01-00:01:37

Eardley-Pryor: Great. The reason why we're here at the Hagood Mill in South Carolina is that you have deep roots that go back to the South, [from where] your family eventually had an exodus, layers of exoduses even.

01-00:01:49

Mair: Well, the purpose, I think, that really has driven me to this site is our own family's tradition of tracking its history and remembering and not forgetting where one comes from. There's an old adage within the African-American community of always being aware of your environment but more importantly knowing where you come from, never forgetting home. I grew up in northern Westchester, but because of my mother, my maternal side, the rich connection of her family to the South and to her family in the South—we were raised in northern Westchester, we were raised in New York, but right here in Greenville, South Carolina and Travelers Rest, this is where home was. Home in the sense of home, like homeland.

This is something that the Native Americans and people who have a deep sense of land and place and space—that your roots were tied to the land, and you were connected to the land. So, I can see why my mother fell in love with the Hudson Highlands [in New York state], because the Hudson Highlands is almost like the high country and the upcountry of South Carolina. And South Carolina has always been the wonder of naturalists for generations, including Joseph LeConte. So the parallels of my upbringing and growth parallels some of the founding fathers of the Sierra Club.

01-00:03:25

Eardley-Pryor: Tell me a little bit who Joseph LeConte was.

01-00:03:28

Mair: Joseph LeConte was a naturalist, a chemist, a biologist, a geologist. He was a polymath of his day. He had deep connections with some of the leaders [of American science] like Louis Agassiz, who's one of the founders of the naturalist movement. But also, when we talk about scientific racism and the Darwinistic method applied to the human species, Louis Agassiz had a profound influence upon Joseph LeConte. And so, Joseph LeConte, being a famed scientist and, as I say, a pretty respected archaeologist and naturalist—he actually studied and actually did tours of the Helderberg Mountains, which I right now live in the shadow of the very Helderberg Mountains.

01-00:04:28

Eardley-Pryor: In New York?

01-00:04:29

Mair: In upstate New York, and that's along the Mohawk River. What's really interesting is that I could not have scripted my travel and my journey into the environmental movement any other way. One would think that you had to really lay out a heavily complex character and growth in the environmental movement. You would try to write a script like this, and it would be really hard.

But indeed, the reality is that my journey comes from my family's sense of home-place and a civil rights struggle, a migration struggle and pressure, dealing with the pressures of racism, while at the same time maintaining human dignity, but also maintaining a connection with their love of the natural beauty and wonders. And so, my mother's settlement [in upstate New York] in a place that mirrored her home [in western South Carolina] was interesting and telling. So my way and my path formally to the environmental movement would come much later, but it was not something special.

A lot of folks believe that the environment and the environmental movement is culturally a white thing. But actually, in the words of Wendell Berry, farmers are really the first environmentalists. They're the first naturalists. They're the ones who are in tune with the seasons of the land. And their life, their culture, their rhythms are shaped by the environment and seasons.

And my culture, custom and heritage, which is rich and deep in such traditions of rural farmers, is anchored right here and begins here at Hagood Mill. My story begins here at Hagood Mill. And it's a very powerful story to tell in the sense that when you talk about culture, custom and heritage and being anchored into the land—which is the core and essence of environmental stewardship—reflects also the complexity of the various institutions that shape our societies to this day.

And so, you cannot talk about environmentalism without talking about race. You cannot talk about environmental stewardship without talking about how mankind lived in harmony with the land. And down here, down South, [in terms of] environmental stewardship, farmers were the stewards of the land. The slaves were the stewards of the land. So it's a powerful, deeper dig. It takes Wendell Berry's words and eloquence on the environment and mankind's unique connection of place and space as stewards. And then when you add in the dimension stratifying it by race and knowing that there was a forced nation—it's the First Nations, the Native Americans, who lived in harmonies with this land. And on this very place, the Cherokees—before they ended up in Oklahoma along the Trail of Tears—they were forced off this very land. But they were another culture and people, again, being First Nations that lived in harmony with the land.

01-00:07:34

Mair:

But my ancestors who came here by force, the forced nations who were slaves—it took another agrarian set of people from Africa, from the West Coast. My ancestors descended from the Gold Coast of Africa, primarily Ghana and Benin, and were brought here to, as they say, serve as slave labor to one of the most wealthy—eventually because of slavery—[they] became quite wealthy landowners in upcountry. And that's Benjamin Hagood [owner of the Hagood Mill]. So my tradition and my connection is that of culture, custom and heritage. It's a culture, custom, and heritage—and love and respect of the environment—that is anchored in slavery. And knowing that origin and root gives me very powerful and unique insights—but also how I view the land and humanity's relationship and harmony with the land, because it's through our stewardship of the land that my family was able to survive for generations.

But also, the other piece of this journey was their faith. Because when I use the terms of culture, custom and heritage, I add in another dimension, which is faith. And it's the power of that faith that served them in, as they say, measuring time. So we have the seasons—that is articulated well and eloquently by Wendell Berry, that time is measured by the spiritual dimension. Because the spiritual dimension was the only place and space where slaves had their freedom, and liberty, and time, and space to their own on the seventh day—by which they could read, by which they could write, by which they could speak in verse and actually learn. So Christianity was not only a powerful tool of protection and expression, but also they could go

inward and find peace inward while their bodies toiled and suffered under the burdens of slavery.

But the other thing to it, [education] was a crime in South Carolina. It was a crime here in Pickens County for slaves to be literate, to read and write. So education was a crime. And the reason why is that, if you were literate about your conditions and if you were aware of your conditions, you would rebel. Education would lead to rebellion, so it was prohibited.

But religious instruction and learning the word of God, folks felt that that was the caged canary singing. So Christianity was used as a tool to cage the canary, to get them to thrive in the worship and duty and service to their masters and thereby gain salvation. But my family used that as the power of the tool to read. And it was through slavery and that religion within slavery that they subversively educated themselves, learned to speak, publicly speak and preach.

Golden Grove Baptist Church was founded here [at the Hagood Mill, in Pickens County, South Carolina]. This is the ancestral home of my family's Baptist church, in 1823. Their tabernacle, their church and their house of worship was just right outside of the cemetery of the Hagood family. While the whites could worship in town at a church, the place and space for the Blacks was right out there by where the Hagood family cemetery was and also where our family and our ancestral cemetery is. And it's been there since the early part of the nineteenth century. [My ancestors] came up with Benjamin [Hagood]. They migrated up when he came from the midlands, which is south of here.

01-00:11:41

Eardley-Pryor: Benjamin Hagood?

01-00:11:42

Mair:

Yeah. This is Benjamin Hagood, late eighteenth century, early nineteenth century, and procured this property. The long and short of it is that they [my ancestors] long been in parallel with this [Hagood] family. This [Hagood] family's fortunes, as they rose and sank, my ancestors were right alongside of them because two things. Not only were they there to suffer the rise and fall of the Hagood family fortune; they also made the Hagood family fortune. So, let's be clear about that.

But when we talk about my connection to the environmental movement, my connection to nature, it's part of a deep, multigenerational, long line and connection that stretches back to my early ancestors, like Barry McKenzie. And to be able to walk in the place and space and still commune with nature the way he did in an unbroken chain—and this is the thing: the chain of environmental connection and stewardship and love of the land has been unbroken in our family.

And that's pretty significant because many Blacks who were forced out of the South due to terrorism and racism lost their connections. And in losing your connection to the land, and losing connection to your heritage, and losing connection to your rural roots and your stewards as farmers—as those who've been the stewards of the land, as those who brought in the crops, who fielded and plowed the crops—when you lose that connection, you lose something quite significant. So when I look at an urban community where I see Blacks who are descendants of slaves, who in earlier generations of migrations have lost these connections, you can see the trauma that's within their souls.

Wendell Berry wrote a great book called *The Unsettling of America*, [about] the crisis of agriculture and the environment. How we have all these various institutions—from land grant colleges, to these investments in the industrialization of agriculture—[lead to] the alienation of the farmer, how it is destroying something that is uniquely American within the farmer's soul and spirit. As we start to go toward this industrialization, as we're losing something that is basic and fundamental, which is part of our culture and connection with the land, these massive technology improvements actually create alienation. They don't create connection.

And then we also see within *The Unsettling of America* his critique of environmental organizations—like the Sierra Club, and all the wilderness societies, and the land grant colleges—as entities that talk about how you industrially destroy your agricultural lands for these industrialized processes, [and] when you put things on the industrial scale, that's not good stewardship. It actually leads to destruction. We talk about the pesticides and all the things that we pour into our crops just to make more. Actually, it not only takes us away from the careful stewardship, but also we're pumping in poison. But then, those remedies called the “saves,” where you have the environmental organizations that are out there called—

01-00:14:59

Eardley-Pryor: Unpack that for me. What do you mean by the “saves?”

01-00:15:01

Mair: The “saves?” What I took from his book was a critique on how environmental organizations want to “save,” as they say, the trees, or “save” a particular landscape. They go out to a scenic place, and they could see the miracle of the Lord's hand upon the face of the Earth. And it drops you to your knees. It's like when you walk into Yosemite Valley for the first time. Who cannot but weep when you see the beauty? Or when you go to Zion National Park and you drop, or you stand on Mount Marcy in the Adirondacks. Who cannot but feel the power of nature, and not only our smallness but also our connectedness, and that we cannot have dominion over all things?

It's that fundamental dialectic that those who seek to have dominion versus those who seek to be stewards. In the “saves,” we create environmental

organizations, and we become part of these clubs. And we think that the best way to protect land and nature is at the exclusion of humanity rather than the inclusion of humanity. It's like building a fine Swiss watch and leaving out a master gear. And so, the "save" organizations and their notion of preservation is missing a critical element, which is humanity, and humanity as a steward within that relationship. We should not be outside of it. Integral to the protection is our harmony with it.

To me, that is like the story of the Yosemite Valley, how the First Nations were cleared out of the Yosemite Valley to protect it, even though they lived there for thousands of years. The notion of "saving" the Yosemite Valley, "saving" the Yosemite, was to strip people whose culture, custom, and heritage—living beautifully and harmoniously within that valley for thousands of years—how that was desecrated by another human's action, to so-called "save" the environment and "save" a beautiful place and space. When humanity is relegated to being viewed as dirty or polluted in the eyes of the environment by other men, we lose something. That is indeed a crisis. And so, the notion of going at this is, I think, a very powerful insight, a very powerful piece.

And it plays even in today when we talk about anthropogenic climate change. We're putting mankind clearly at the center of causing this significant harm. And whether we deny it or what have you, it's still a powerful point of taking ownership.

01-00:17:54

Mair:

And when you do that, you see our role is a very significant role. So, if we're not conscious about what we do and how we interact with the environment, we can overload it with everything from carbon and all the carbon-based pollutants. And while we think about our convenience of mass transit, and getting from here to there, and flying from here to there without regards to what it may be doing to the planet—it's a form of blindness. So merely just trying to "save" it without humanity, and not looking at humanity as a solution or as a tool within that solution, what is broken is us. That is the thing that has to be repaired. We have to repair ourselves. We have to restore not only nature but even restoring ourselves and that culture-custom-and-heritage connection to the environment.

In many cases, restoring and protecting the environment, in some cases, requires our active stewardship in ways that don't negate the power of humanity but accelerates the power of humanity. And how do you pull this all, and weave it together, and help these things to find a balance? And again, there are places. This is not for all places and spaces, but where humanity and environment has lived in harmony for generations, for thousands of years. And we see that with the First Nations. They have what they call a seven-generation approach to their existence.

01-00:19:31

Mair:

And, I see deep parallels with that with my own ancestors' culture. Because once they were freed, once they were emancipated in 1865, their whole approach to the land, the seven-generation approach of protection of the land, was very critical—and not only from the point of providing food and sustenance, but also for providing recreation. It was the *place*. The creek right behind our church, for generations, baptized hundreds of my family members since the days of slavery. Prior to that, while they were enslaved, they were baptized here at Twelve Mile Creek, in these very woods. This is where they were anointed at, in this very creek that actually feeds and powers Hagood Mill, the place where they were held in bondage. The water that powered the mill that ground the wheat and processed the food, here at this plant was also the water that consecrated their souls and was poured upon their graves when they departed. So our connection to the environment—to the land, the air, the water, and the soil—is as sacred and as ancient as humanity.

So going back to that earlier point that I said about home, you have a deepening feeling and awareness. And in my role as an environmental activist—and seeing these things come together in my lifetime, and my development within the movement—I have been able to witness firsthand the power of John Muir's point of the thread of life and that all things are hitched together. I found the power of that hitch. So when I came into this movement, from my growth as a young man in the wilds of the Hudson Highlands of New York, I was able to bring in that rich cultural experience I already had, I just took for granted. When you are connected—when you are a farmer, you're connected with the land; when you're in the rural, you are connected. You just don't think—it's as [normal] as moving, as breathing—you don't think it as something special.

I would not have called myself an environmentalist back then, but I was. Hunting, fishing was a place. And the rituals of hunting, fishing, and trapping was the point of cultural transfer. The culture and traditions that my father and grandfather were able to pass on to me were the same cultures and traditions that John Paul McKenzie received from William Barry McKenzie, William Barry received from Zion McKenzie, Zion McKenzie received from Barry McKenzie, right here in an unbroken chain, a line of communication, of culture, custom, and heritage.

01-00:22:27

Eardley-Pryor:

Let's unpack some of those threads that are connecting that and linking this culture, custom, and heritage through your story. You said you were born in 1960—near Peekskill, where you grew up—in Valhalla, New York. To whom? Who are your parents?

01-00:22:42

Mair:

My mother was Margaret Elizabeth Mair. Her maiden name is McKenzie. And, Margaret Elizabeth McKenzie, who would become Mair, she was the daughter of John Paul McKenzie. John Paul McKenzie was the son of

William Barry McKenzie and Alie Thompson. William Barry McKenzie was the son of Zion McKenzie and Mary Edens.

As we passed coming here [to the Hagood Mill, in the car today], we passed Samuel B. Edens' property. And what was interesting was that Mary [Edens] was a white woman, which was unusual in 1867, 68, for a white woman to be with a newly-freed or descendant, in the case of Zion, a newly-freed slave. And so, it was a very interesting story. And a clue into that story happened during some of my research about ten years ago, when you're doing your family history and work, which our family does, and I'm the family historian. I came across a very interesting court record. Because a lot of times people tend to look at old deeds and wills and all these things when they're doing their family history and genealogy. But a very interesting and powerful source for genealogy for African-Americans is that you should look actually at court records and court criminal records. Because [of] Jim Crow laws, Blacks routinely ran afoul of them, and these were ways in which they could then be incarcerated and then be forced for use as laborers on plantations and highway departments. A lot of the rural roads back then were built by people re-enslaved under the Jim Crow laws. So that was the powerful incentive and insight of why you should look at old nineteenth and twentieth century court records. And so buried, actually in a nineteenth century court record, I came across a case of two Eden brothers who were under suspicion of murder.

01-00:25:11

Eardley-Pryor: And this is Mary Edens' brothers?

01-00:25:13

Mair: These were Mary Edens' brothers.

01-00:25:14

Eardley-Pryor: And Mary is the one who married Zion McKenzie?

01-00:25:16

Mair: Zion, yes. So this is the thing. The question is, how would anybody allow that to happen? And what would happen? And so the clue that I have here [*pointing to the document; see appendix to this oral history*] in looking at this case, Zion McKenzie actually was in that field investigative report. He was questioned as whether or not he was a possible witness [to the murder], because he was actually working in the field. And that field is one of the Hagood fields that's actually adjacent to the Edens property. As we drove here [today] to Hagood Farm, you see these properties adjoin one another. So while Zion was out in the field working, he would have been around to see or witness and hear a discharge of a weapon like a gun and possibly witness—because the fields were very big and flat, some rolling hill there, you would have been able to see something. So, Zion was brought in as a witness to this. And it was his testimony that led to them *not* finding Absolom [Edens] and his brother guilty of a potential murder.

And then, interestingly, they had, if you were to pull [a census], you would see Mary there with her brothers and whatnot—actually, in an 1860 [census], because they would be free. You would see the household of Sidney Edens, you will see Mary [Edens] within the household, with her brothers. It's one of those things that I will supply for the archives and the records, because it's kind of interesting that you have this household.

Clearly, she must have seen Zion working in that field countless times. And given the proximity of the land—these are massive holdings—so this is not an easy place where one can find a suitable mate. It's the end of the Civil War, so it's Reconstruction. Zion, he was, along with Isaac Talley, [they were] Teamsters and actually on the side of the Confederacy, and so they earned cash there. But also when the Union Army employed them, they enforced—because this became a military district—Blacks at that time had to be documented as adults, and they had to be paid in wages. He worked also at Caesars Head, and the Hagoods had to go from not paying him, to paying him. He was one of their skilled workers. He was a big, strapping man. So he had what we called back then “prospects.” And so, you figure most poor, white veterans who served on the side of the South didn't have money. And you actually come across somebody that was hard, industrious, and working that had money. Zion, economically, would have been a very good catch. And indeed, he was.

And so, Mary Edens and Zion McKenzie gave birth to about nine boys and girls, of which William Barry McKenzie, who's the oldest, is my great-grandfather. And so that unbroken line is the line that reaches back. I'm glad you asked me about my mom. And I left out one side because my mom's mother is a Ballenger and Foster.

01-00:28:58

Eardley-Pryor: Just so I can get things straight in my head, your mom [was] Mary Elizabeth McKenzie?

01-00:29:03

Mair: *Margaret* Elizabeth McKenzie.

01-00:29:04

Eardley-Pryor: I'm sorry. *Margaret* Elizabeth McKenzie is a McKenzie on her paternal side?

01-00:29:09

Mair: Her paternal, [yes]. She's a McKenzie. Margaret is a McKenzie.

01-00:29:16

Eardley-Pryor: Then Margaret's mother is on the Ballinger side?

01-00:29:17

Mair: Her mother, right, Rosa Mae Ballenger. And Rosa Mae Ballenger is a descendant of the Ballenger line. And Rosa Mae Ballenger's side actually tracks to a Revolutionary War hero, Ed Ballenger, who served in the Battle of

Cowpens. And Ed Ballenger—which is another interesting way in which the institution of slavery was very peculiar—because in his will he lent, by name, Omev Ballenger—actually [she] was called Omev, and her two sons, Elias and Haley. Haley is my ancestor grandfather. So it's unusual because normally slaves are listed in an inventory and assessment, which she was, but that's where they usually are. But in the [will's] main document, where you're setting out your property and who gets what and where, very little care is often—you bequeath them to your next heir, and that heir can dispose of them as they wish. But he [Ed Ballenger] did something very interesting in her case in that he lent them. He did not bequeath them, which is a very technical point.

So there was this battle that I followed through [historical documents on] the equity courts of the family. They're trying to break the will so they can sell Omev and the two boys. But there were also family members who were fighting to keep them in that status. So clearly, these were half-brothers and sisters. So you can imagine a household where the white woman is living with, in the words of Mary Chesnut, with her husband's concubine, and the concubine's children looking very much like her children. What a queer situation that creates. So I had that Mary Chesnut admonition because it was a very powerful thing in her diary. But it played out on the Ballenger side.

But what's interesting about that is that, from that bloodline, their settlement on the property is how they ended up [with] their land. That was how Blacks met. You just did not marry for love and go off and your girl finds a nice handsome young man and falls off in love, and then off they go. Children of former slaves had to find prospects. And like anything else, you had to be able to provide for your family. And so who your family was, and what church did they go to, what congregation—these things were very, very, very big things. So my mother, [from] her Ballenger side, we also have the slave records for. We also have the complex will.

01-00:31:36

Mair:

And about fifteen years ago, we actually had a joint family reunion of the Ballengers from the white side and the African-American side meet. In fact, that's where I found that one of my cousins was a seated congressman from out of North Carolina. His name was Cass Ballenger, who was of the Jesse Helms stripe. And when Cass Ballenger found out that his brother Bruce Ballenger broke the silence and reached out to the Black Ballenger side, it was a very interesting thing in that side of the family. But Bruce, his wife, and family came, and we had a very fabulous reunion right up here at Paris Mountain, just right up here just north of Greenville. So that was one of the earlier parallels, but again, a very strong parallel to Ben Hagood. But I do not have any evidence that LeConte—or people like him who were slave owners—had, out of what luck, families with the slaves. But that was another common feature of the institution of slavery.

But the amazing thing about the Ballenger piece was that, clearly, Ed Ballenger was troubled with the institution of slavery. He knew that he just didn't want—these were his children. What a radical way to dispose of them, to create a complicated will that his wife could not have clear title to sell them. And that lending gave her use, but not 100 percent ownership, [of land]. And our [Ballenger] family settled over there in Inman. And one of the communities that they created was a community called Little Africa, which exists.

01-00:33:59

Eardley-Pryor: This is the Ballenger family, correct?

01-00:34:00

Mair: This is the Ballengers and Fosters. They created a community called Little Africa. And that's outside of Spartanburg, South Carolina.

01-00:34:08

Eardley-Pryor: Who are the Fosters?

01-00:34:10

Mair: Foster is another family of ownership. Simpson Ballenger, who is the son of Omey Ballenger, and Omey Ballenger, who's the daughter of Haley Ballenger. Haley and his mother [the original Omey Ballenger] were listed in Ed Ballenger's will. So that line comes down, and Simpson Ballenger marries Simpson Foster's daughter. Her name is Rosa Foster, and so Rosa Foster then marries Simpson. So there's two Rosa Ballengers: one's my grandmother, and one's my great-grandmother. So that's that Ballenger-Foster line. And again, that was another landed African—two landed African-American families. And then when they married into the McKenzies, they were marrying into another landed African-American family.

The connections between my family was that when they married, they married people that also had land, that also were connected with their churches. This was a very strong theme because these churches were more than just churches. These were like city halls. These were like the places where deeds were kept, wills were kept. People were always worried about being cheated or losing a document. So these churches were major repositories of documents for former slaves. So when church burnings were happening, these were not accidents. Along with the Jim Crow laws, a lot of the segregationist whites knew that the churches were the repositories of records of many former slaves. And so that when you burn a church to the ground, you actually destroy records. And then the county and other people would come in and claim title to these people's land because they could no longer prove title to the land.

So these were very, very complex arrangements, but most of the times documents do survive. I come from that deep connection where a lot of documents did survive. And our family, because of their status, were able to take pictures. In fact, one of Zion McKenzie's sons, Andrew McKenzie—or

they called him Uncle Andy—was a photographer. And so, Andy during the early twentieth century—actually, the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century—made his tintypes and daguerreotypes. He had a photography studio right down here in Easley, South Carolina. So a lot of tintypes and daguerreotypes that have survived from our family were actually Andy's pieces. I actually have a couple of those in my collection.

What I do have also is Andy's pictures of Zion McKenzie. And that's why we have the pictures of Zion and Andy's nephew, John Paul. [Uncle Andy] was pretty renowned, and actually, he was deaf and a mute. I wouldn't call it sign language, but everybody knew how Uncle Andy talked. He had a thriving career as a photographer, and somehow his subjects knew how to communicate. And he had the eye by which he made a decent living as a photographer. His death was that he got actually hit by a car in Easley, South Carolina because he could not hear it. He was struck and killed by a car in the early part of the twentieth century.

01-00:38:06

Eardley-Pryor: When you're telling these stories, it sounds like you've done so much digging over decades, through the records, to try to trace these roots and to make these links real for your family. But I also get the sense that you met some of these people, or at least have families that [met] these family members.

01-00:38:23

Mair: Well, two things. One of the powerful things about family, the research is just one piece of it. My family had always—anywhere from three years to, some cases, five years—what we had is continual reunions. So as a child, my father and them, they would load us all up in the cars. Because you just did not want to go through the segregated areas, there were routes by which Blacks could travel from the northeast down to the South. And these routes, you would come back, and you would actually—because, like I said, the connection was unbroken in that my mom made sure we came back [to South Carolina], and we knew where we came from. Yeah, I was born in Peekskill, New York—or actually born in Westchester County, Valhalla, but lived and raised in Peekskill, New York. But my *home* is here [in Travelers Rest, South Carolina]. And that was always reinforced.

And with that—with all these reunions and these church gatherings—was always the oral history of your family, of who you are, where you came from. It was our way of celebrating and laughing at Pharaoh, on how he enslaved our people and kept us in bondage, had us working the land and fielding his crops, the women's breast milk feeding his children over our ancestors. And to come back and to gather and still rejoice that you survived that, and rejoicing in that—that was the way memories were passed on.

So what did I do when I got the duty, and blessing, and honor of being our family historian? Well, this was carried on by my aunt Leola Ballenger. Leola

Ballenger, interestingly enough, actually was also the Ballenger family historian, the Foster family historian, and the McKenzie family historian. So she, because of her education, she was like the Harriet Tubman of our family.

Right above the [state] border here from Travelers Rest is a place called Rutherfordton, North Carolina, and Asheville. And so those Ballenger women were like the Mary McLeod Bethunes. They set up and they got jobs right over the border. And that was so that the young women in the family could come across the border and get a high school education. South Carolina, during the deep pre-Brown vs. Board of Education, only provided primary education, and even that was segregated for Blacks. So [in South Carolina] you only got to an elementary school education.

01-00:41:14

Mair:

So the secondary education that would allow you to get to an HCBU, a historically Black college, which is what I'll call a Booker T. Washington education, which still was not a great university, it was still being served with a—they actually positioned themselves to do that. So our family, and the women in our family, were very powerful and entrepreneurial in leveraging geography and allowing children and family to migrate in between one another's households so they could take advantage of education. That was one of the tools, the survival tools, that the family had.

My uncle Clarence Milton Green who, in the shadow of the segregated school system here in Travelers Rest—because the children were educated in a one-room schoolhouse right up on our family property, which was adjacent to the [Golden Grove] church, and this is on top of paying taxes that paid for the white school but gave no benefit to the Blacks—it had a separate, segregated school. You had to hire a teacher. And so the children were able to get through primary education. And through Uncle Andy McKenzie and the other, Zion McKenzie's brother that lived in Greenville, who had houses—the daughters from some of the families right here in Travelers Rest would then go to Greenville and stay with family members, work and clean houses and serve as domestics, at the same time going to high school. That was another way [my family leveraged geography to maintain their high school educations]. And the high school was a segregated Black high school in Greenville. They had one remote school. And even that got second-class status. So Clarence Milton Green actually rose up to challenge that in the 1930s.

01-00:43:02

Mair:

And so, that was another tool by which not only education was advanced, but more importantly the tradition of keeping memory and keeping records. And so, this notion of being aware, I inherited a lot of the records and files of family members for the past 120 years. So I have a lot of these journals. I have the insurance policies, their lands, their deed records. So a lot of those records passed on to me.

And then something fascinating happened during the [nineteen] seventies, and folks don't realize how powerful it was, because what it did was validate and accelerate what was already occurring within Black communities. There was a movie called "Roots." Alex Haley did that movie. And it popularized genealogy, not just for African-Americans, which already was going on. Because Alex Haley was basically a kid like me, practicing that tradition. And his educational background allowed him to be systematizing and writing it and documenting it and organizing it and collating it. But the raw material he had, that had been passed down from the family.

And that is my role, like an Alex Haley, I've been able to take these records and arrange them, and then take the various mosaics of tiles and to piece them together to give the family a much more linear and sharper picture of that journey that had been collected over time and had been passed on to me. So I speak with the authority of oral tradition that has been passed down. And since my lifespan, my great-grandfather, William Barry McKenzie, he died at the ripe old age of 114 years of age. He was in a Tarrytown nursing home. He was born when Ulysses S. Grant was President of the United States. And his lifetime overlapped mine.

01-00:45:23

Mair:

It's kind of fascinating that you have this guy living into the 1970s and overlapping mine. So I had access to primary—so, if you think about his lifetime, he had this deep nineteenth-century lifetime of lived experience, and his overlapped clearly with his father and his grandfather. So, William, if you take that, in that oral tradition that's being passed forward, you have a seamless primary-source overlap of records. These stories are not abstract, vague recollections. These are people whose lifetimes I lived within, and at their heel and at their side, listening to the stories of how things were done and how the families survived and how they performed the countless miracles.

So we have our Passover story. We have our deep knowledge of what was our metaphorical Egypt. And we have the deep knowledge of our migration out of this Egypt and our wandering in the wilderness. We have the deep knowledge of taking those commandments upon the hill—granted it was Caesars Head—but then setting up and doing for ourselves. And the skills that we had acquired at this place and space from that relationship—using our tools and our labor now and forging a destiny for the family—these things not only built the new community of Golden Grove, which is right there in Travelers Rest. But the industrious spirit and the faith that fueled that industrious spirit, and the hope and the aspirations, all these things were passed on.

01-00:47:15

Mair:

So, I tell people, they say, "Oh, you've got a lot of stuff. You must work a lot online." No. This you don't have online. A lot of this is priceless memories and priceless records and heirlooms that are passed down. I just pride myself on being the next generous steward of them. And these records will be passed

on to the next series of stewards. One of the great things about family reunions is that I have the dozen or so nieces, nephews, and cousins, and daughters that will actually carry on this work. So the tradition continues.

But also it is the passing of a deeper baton. When I say deep environmental stewardship, I'm looking seven generations down the road. And I already can see my daughter and my grandchildren, so that's two generations. And passing into them, if I'm blessed to see a great-grandchild, then that's three. But I'll be able to pass these values that have been transferred to me. And they would get them as unadulterated as I got them. So my grandchild speaking to me, he can hear Zion's voice. He can hear Zion's wisdom. He can hear Barry's wisdom. And so, these things do speak.

And our churches, by the way—even though Golden Grove Baptist Church has been burned down three times, it still stands. And so the story of that church, the memory of that church and its continuity, that tabernacle still stands. And it is as sacred as the Temple Mount to us. These traditions, like I said, are anchored into that deep, rich history. These are not just pieces of paper. There's actual land that you can walk. There's actual stone that you can touch.

What I am, is being a good steward, a good environmental steward, because preserving memory—because again, we talk about monuments and memorials. This is nothing more than another monument and memorial. And [by talking with me] here, you're just having not only an environmentalist but that oral historian, that longitudinal long memory of that interwoven fabric that reminds people who we are, where we are, where we come from. But [also] what we are to do, what we are called to do—the stewardship of not only our heritage and legacy, but the stewardship of our heritage and legacy through the *land* that has been passed on to us for generations. The only thing that's broken is when we came from out of Canaan here into the Promised Land. But, we can talk about that.

01-00:50:09

Eardley-Pryor: Let's step back to build that story out. Maybe we can kind of move through it chronologically. William Barry McKenzie seems like the oldest living memory that you have, a person you could speak to and hear their voice?

01-00:50:22

Mair: Yes.

01-00:50:23

Eardley-Pryor: But Zion McKenzie seems to be kind of where the story—the family story—begins.

01-00:50:28

Mair: Yes.

01-00:50:29

Eardley-Pryor: So, tell me if you can, where did Zion McKenzie's story begin? How did it intersect with the Hagoods on this site? This seems to be the place where things began.

01-00:50:41

Mair: Well, it is. Zion's name is appropriate. If, again, we talk about script and a person who is both the embodiment but also the metaphor, his name speaks to his biblical power. I think he probably—outside of Zion meaning the holy land—through him we got to the holy land, our Zion, which is the Golden Grove community right there in Travelers Rest. But he is also Moses. He is also Moses.

01-00:51:22

Eardley-Pryor: So where does his story begin?

01-00:51:23

Mair: His story begins as the second generation [of McKenzies], because Barry was amongst the first that was transported to Hagood Mill.

01-00:51:34

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, his father is Barry, Zion's father?

01-00:51:37

Mair: Zion's father is Barry McKenzie. Zion had a price on him of about, I believe, \$925, his value at that time.

01-00:51:53

Eardley-Pryor: And what was that time?

01-00:51:55

Mair: \$925 would be probably about, equivalent today's dollars—

01-00:52:00

Eardley-Pryor: [I mean] the timeframe.

01-00:52:01

Mair: Oh, this is in 1865. He was appraised. In fact, it's kind of interesting because they didn't say, "You were age 'this.'" Your age was viewed as an appraisal amount. So when you look at the will, it's a lot of very interesting terms in these documents, legal documents. And children were appraised at an age. Think about that. It's not, "How old are you?" It's, "How much are you at this age worth?"

So Zion was a very powerful, strapping, very talented man. I actually have some bricks that he shaped with his hand that I can touch and feel his thumbprint in. He made these bricks. They made bricks here at Hagood Mill. It's that tradition in these things. While I do not have his voice in my head, I have his voice in my heart through my great-grandfather William, because I have William's voice in my head. But I have the artifact that this Moses had

touched, shaped, but also through the lived lives of my grandparents and great-grandparents.

They transferred Zion, who is that Moses that took us out of the place called Pumpkintown—because Pickens is a large area, but the geographic area within Pickens County is called Pumpkintown. It's a large area. And this is the northeast corner of Pickens County. And just across the border in Greenville is Caesars Head, which is the property, if you ever look at it. Zion was amongst the first generation free, and he still labored here. He did a number of jobs, not only his work for the Hagood family but also his side jobs and his [own] work. So he did work industriously to save money.

01-00:54:20

Mair:

And Zion was able to, through his travels—because he traveled along what is now the Cherokee Highway, [which] is an east-west route from Pickens through Spartanburg. But along that route he found a parcel crossing over Hagood Bridge. He was able to locate a parcel of land. He started out with 100 acres, and he kept buying large tracts of land. And that became the homestead and the homeland where the family, where he and Mary would settle and raise a large number of children. And he was followed later by his brother Barry Junior and a few other brothers, Warren and a few others, who lived on the land. And they worked for Zion. They worked for Zion the same way they worked for Benjamin Hagood. But the difference is they were not slaves. And they were pooling their labor.

And they knew that through this cooperative—think about labor co-ops, where you pool your labor but you share in the profits and you share in the gains. And so, he would sharecrop out and sub his land to his brothers who had to produce a crop, a portion for him, but also retain a bit for themselves. But they also did everything, from charcoal—they had all these other innovative sites. They had a sawmill and a few other things. Basically, as these things generated more revenue, they bought more land. So they ended up with significant holdings.

01-00:55:58

Mair:

Zion McKenzie was—through his work, and through his morality, through his leadership, through his living that culture, custom and heritage of the land—he metaphorically was one with the land. He would be a Wendell Berry archetype farmer. He knew the seasons. He was that guide for Caesars Head. When those naturalists would come in to explore the wonders of this upcountry, he was one of the guides. He was one of the guides that would take people out. He knew this land. And those traditions, like I said, were things that never left him.

And remember, this is the family that had also another piece. We didn't have doctors. The women were midwives, but they also knew what the healing herbs were and what the healing medicines were. So Zion was the one who,

again, through his knowledge of the flora and fauna, he would collect those things, the homeopathic remedies. He was a jack of all of those things. And in him, he was also really the first civil rights resistor in our family.

01-00:57:35

Eardley-Pryor: What do you mean?

01-00:57:37

Mair:

Well, one of the things [by which] you could take the measure of Blacks who were newly freed at that time: they were in the face of the most vicious form of backlash and white terrorism at that time. It was the end of the Civil War, and many of the whites—white males—were poor, injured, unemployed. They lost a lot. And all of a sudden, now you see Blacks awash in money. Now, they totally ignored the fact that these people had to work and had to labor and had to earn a living. That was immaterial. It's almost sort of like the irrational observations of somebody right-wing today when they project upon the immigrant hordes coming up north, "They're going to overrun and take something away from you."

The reality is that Zion had earned and amassed money. He didn't steal his land. He bought his land. He was a high-skilled worker, laborer, and entrepreneur who, through his life and the life of his siblings and his family, made the Hagood family one of the wealthiest textile families and merchants in the South. Even though the South had lost the [Civil War], Benjamin Hagood—[who] had his sons fight in the war—but Benjamin Hagood still had to run this [Hagood Mill] operation. And when he ran this operation, it was actually men like Zion who were here still running this place and keeping it profitable. At the end of the war, it was not burned down. This was the place that was used to rebuild the [South Carolina] upcountry. It was used to rebuild. And so, their skilled labor produced the raw materials to rebuild this area. Zion and them earned that money.

And they also, like I said, they quietly practiced their faith at the old Golden Grove church. And in that faith, he became a Moses of men. He led them to vote, Zion. We have his voting records. I mean, to be an African-American who voted in the upcountry of South Carolina, which was one of its most virulent and recalcitrant areas, is a big deal.

01-00:59:59

Mair:

You hear about the Stoneman Raids. In fact, [the song] "The Night they Drove Old Dixie Down," you hear Stoneman's Cavalry came and tore up the tracks again. Well, Stoneman was raiding this area. This was the area that Stoneman was raiding. Jeff Davis fled through this area, [the upcountry of South Carolina]. In my review of some of the records, I think Jeff Davis [Jefferson Davis, President of seceded Confederate States of the South] might have passed through Caesars Head. But that's something to be researched. But what is clear: Stoneman was in pursuit of Jeff Davis, and the route by which where they caught Jefferson Davis in Georgia had to pass through this area of

South Carolina. And the fact that Stoneman came and seized at least a dozen horses from Benjamin Hagood's widow. Zion was here. Zion was here when Stoneman's Cavalry was raiding this portion. Zion was here when Stoneman was in pursuit of Jefferson Davis.

So Zion was astute in the awareness of the power of his new freedoms that he was going to gain. But he did not jump out boldly. He also was sound enough to know that, "I have to work. My mother, my father, my families, this place is coming apart." And he kept it together because his father Barry, at that time—people say, "How do you know this?" Because one of the greatest things about Benjamin Hagood's will, not only does it list who my family is and who they are and their ages and what have you, and granted Barry McKenzie, who was forty-five years of age—

01-01:01:42

Eardley-Pryor: In 1865?

01-01:01:43

Mair:

This is in 1865. There's a little line, "unsound," meaning that's another way of saying "broken," when you have that psychological break because of the burdens upon [you]. You've been brutalized so much. One way of measuring your family is the conditions, or records that document and give them a little sense of what they are. And when you see a person reduced to the state of being "unsound," there is a powerful source. So that meant that the oldest son [of Barry, meaning Zion], it fell upon his shoulders to be the rock, the Moses standing upon the rock of the family. So while Barry was unsound, Zion had to be the rock in the place of his father, taking care of his mother, brothers, and sisters. And in a period where they're torn between being chased off the land.

And clearly, Amber Hagood, Ben Hagood's wife, she was dependent upon these former slaves to still keep this place profitable. So they probably came to an arrangement that allowed the [then freed McKenzie] family to still work and provide [the Hagoods] a massive income, but at least provide [the McKenzie] wages. But clearly that money was what Zion [used to] just basically bode his time. So, again, another piece of evidence in that clearly they were working and they were earning a living.

But there was some tension [in] that the family never took the Hagood name. A lot of slaves would take the surname of their slave masters. Now, some of my ancestors did. But Barry McKenzie's family, Zion and them, they took on the last name McKenzie.

01-01:03:43

Eardley-Pryor: Where does that come from?

01-01:03:44

Mair: We recognize that during the height of the Civil War in 1863, something strange occurred right next to the Hagood farm, the Hagood Mill. A colonel from the Confederate Army, Francis Edward McKenzie, bought up the Keith property, which is adjoining this property here.

01-01:04:05

Eardley-Pryor: Adjoining the Hagood property?

01-01:04:06

Mair: Adjoining the Hagoods, right up in between the Edens property—Edens, Keith, and then Hagood property.

01-01:04:12

Eardley-Pryor: And Edens, the [family] that Zion married into?

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Mair: Exactly. So, we don't know what the relationship was, but clearly at the height in 1863, for a colonel to be paying \$25,000 for a plot of land, that's like money laundering. There's something strange.

01-01:04:31

Eardley-Pryor: That's a ton of money.

01-01:04:32

Mair: Things weren't going great for the South in 1863, and people of rank with that kind of [suspicious] stuff. Francis Edward McKenzie, what were you doing in the Cherokee Foothills with that kind of money buying up property when all these other theaters [of war] were very active, and your service was needed elsewhere? There's something strange there. I haven't been able to piece this piece together.

01-01:04:56

Eardley-Pryor: Where was this piece you found? What document did you see that [had] this \$25,000 purchase?

01-01:04:56

Mair: Well, because when searching my family for over—I've been at this now for over forty years. So naturally, when you're doing your family's history as research, you search for McKenzie, and you make that standard assumption. Again, using Alex Haley's method, is that you take on the name of your former slave master. So we believed that somehow we were the slaves of Francis Edward McKenzie. But a lot of evidence and data and other records were not lining up. So, where they were living in 1870 vis-à-vis Francis Edward's property, they were adjoining. But a lot of things [were not lining up and needed further research].

So we actually went through a lot of the slave records, the inventory assessments, their probate records, and we pored through them. And so when we hit enough dead walls, then it's the fact that remains after everything else

proves to wash out. So that was what made it true. So that meant that, “Okay, they might not be McKenzie’s slaves.” But then, whose slaves were they?

01-01:06:11

Eardley-Pryor: So, they took the name McKenzie, but it was the Hagoods?

01-01:06:13

Mair: It was the Hagoods that owned them.

01-01:06:15

Eardley-Pryor: And how did you find that link?

01-01:06:16

Mair: Well, the thing is that—and this is the good thing about—I’m an epidemiological spatial analyst for the New York State Health Department. And I do a lot of epidemiological mapping in GIS [Geographic Information System] using spatial analysis to map diseases’ outbreaks and look at trends and patterns—a lot of Big Data analysis, a lot of number theory. You’ve got to look at certain patterns.

I came up with what I call a “place-theory method” that I developed. And I said, “Well okay, everything occurs in a geographic point and place and space.” So, I had everything from 1867 to 1868, population records. I had Zion McKenzie’s voting records, poll tax records. So, I had a lot of data points that would give me a location.

01-01:07:15

Mair: So I said, “Well, people did not travel very far at that particular point in time.” We know that Zion traveled to Greenville, and specifically [to] the Golden Grove, or that Marietta area of Greenville, which is what they call that Bates District. We knew that he settled there. But the point was that’s an endpoint, and the question is, starting with that, reaching back, well, what you reach back to is then you look at the places that are on all those legal documents. What kept coming up was Pickens County and Pumpkintown. So I knew that between Pumpkintown and Travelers Rest, that’s the two points.

And so, with that, I drew, using an arc—using Pumpkintown as my Point A and my Point B the outer arc to Travelers Rest—and I made a big circle, a big geographic circle. And I said, “Give me all the plantation owners within the arc of that radius.” And for about another ten years, I had to pore through the probate, wills, and countless records of all the big slave owners in that arc. It wasn’t a lot, there were about thirty. But that’s still a lot of paperwork. And the records are not, as they would say, indexed. So when you’re dealing with wills and probates and varying forms of writing and the associated maps—that’s the other thing, taking these maps. Once you’ve got land maps and things, you just piece these things together.

I was doing these things alphabetically, so I finally got to the H’s. And when I got to the H’s, I ended up pulling the wills and records of Benjamin Hagood—

Benjamin Hagood, owner of Hagood Mill. As I'm working through his probate records, he has his very detailed inventory assessment listing his slaves by name and their prices and their condition, which is a very powerful document. It's a very interesting document when you get it. And I'm reading down, and I saw the name Barry. So I peeked up because I'd seen it in a couple of other places. It is not an odd name.

01-01:09:45

Mair:

But then the next line, it came over Barry Caroline, and then the daughter, Nancy, who was then about two [years old]—no, one. And then the next line came Zion. So when I had four names that I knew, I knew that it was like I'm Dr. Carter at King Tutankhamen's tomb. I know I found it. And so I went through this document, and then I pulled an 1870 census and put them side-by-side. And I drew the lines between them—when they were in the condition of slavery, and then to the point where they were freed—and looked at the household together. That's how I was able to piece together that it was, then, Hagood Mill where they were at.

And so, with that discovery, which occurred just as I was wrapping up my presidency at the Sierra Club, two things were happening. I was wrapping up my presidency that May.

01-01:10:53

Eardley-Pryor:

This is May 2017? Because you were [Sierra Club] president from May 2015 to 2017.

01-01:10:58

Mair:

That's correct.

01-01:10:59

Eardley-Pryor:

So May in 2017 is when you're making these pieces come together?

01-01:11:01

Mair:

Yes. So, it's really powerful and fitting because, remember, in 2016, I'm coming off the 150th anniversary of the 15th Amendment, which gave the voting rights, the first voting rights, to African people. So I'm coming off the 150th anniversary of emancipation, freedom, citizenship and voting rights. And this occurred during my presidency: it's the 50th year of the Civil Rights Act and the American Voting Rights Act. And I had already begun—as part of my efforts of knitting together the civil rights, environmental rights, and labor rights background, because of my ancestors and my role in civil rights, but also as an environmental justice activist—I saw all of these things coming together.

But also, a lot of the environmental injustices were land decisions and rules decisions based upon elected officials. And voting rights impacted the power for you to elect people who would basically make land-use rules and decisions in your interest. So, actually, environmental rights and environmental justice is a function of our civil society in a healthy democracy. So, in making that

initiative under my watch [as Sierra Club president], we had the Democracy Initiative Program. We had to do a massive rollout. And this is a huge linking of environmental rights, civil rights, voting rights, linking the fact that environmental [justice] is a function of a healthy democracy in civil society.

Civil rights groups—the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and all these others—have been, for generations, saying these things are all connected. This is where Dr. Martin Luther King’s mutuality of our dependence coming together now fuses up and overlaps with John Muir’s the thread of things. So the words of King and John Muir totally clicked. And we then, during that fusion—because I had to not only convince environmental activists that this was the path; I had to also go into the venerable civil rights organizations and labor rights organizations and teach them this new pedagogy and this new vision and this new perspective.

The democracy awakening and the fusion of the civil rights, environmental rights, and labor rights efforts really jived with our efforts to save humanity. Because if we’re going to talk about [how] to enlist humanity to save the planet, we have to tap and show humanity how these things are all connected. We have to take that Dr. King argument, that John Muir argument, of the mutuality of man and its dependence that all things are connected and that all of our suffering are connected in this uniqueness. We’re all in this together.

01-01:14:01

Mair:

This was a powerful coming together of my custom, culture, and heritage—my existence, as well as being an environmental rights activist, and a civil rights activist. One of the things I didn’t mention, which we’ll probably talk about, I was already filing lawsuits when I was in the environmental justice movement that was actually linking causes of actions and civil rights harm, which were environmental degradation and environmental crimes against people of color. And it’s not until the *Toxic Wastes and Race* study [*Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites*, by Charles Lee, for the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, 1987] that we start to see the dots being laid out. There was the incident in North Carolina that was part of the spark. But then that spark led the United Church of Christ, again another faith organization, to step up and do the first empirical data analysis of its kind in looking at where things were cited environmentally by race, class and caste.

It took a very multi-variable, multidimensional model and looked at all these things together. And they found a very powerful analysis that there was not an arbitrariness to pollution and environmental degradation. There’s actually some very deliberate aspects. But more importantly, these aspects of pollution and environmental degradation fell along the civil rights fault line in America. They fell along the racial fault line in America. And it made sense because political decision-making that also fell along racial fault lines would dictate

that those legislators, those rule-makers, those policy-makers would rule and legislate in a way that would disadvantage minorities—Native Americans, Hispanics, and Blacks—and advantage whites.

01-01:15:53

Mair:

So wherever a monument went—wherever a national monument designation where things would be preserved and protected—these were often done in white places and spaces. And I think that also led to that sense of entitlement by whites that if these things were being preserved and protected by whites, then it's the right of whites. This creates a very perverse incentive and another way of why environmental racism filters into the conservation movement, because this became a mutually reinforced pattern of benefits in national monuments occurring in white spaces while the degradation and destruction of environment was occurring in the Black spaces.

So my epiphany of these things coming together—these things all came together in my term—it was the opportunity for me. And my innovation was to tie these things together. My presidency wasn't about being the first African-American president of the Sierra Club, but the first true holistic-thinking president of the Sierra Club, the person with the unified theory. That $E = MC^2$ moment with the environment, that was my epiphany in tying the civil rights, voting rights, and labor rights together. Because it is the condition of labor that drives the condition of man and how we view the environment.

I told folks to look at the coal worker. People don't choose to die and work in coal mines. They don't choose black lung as death. What they're really laboring for is what's in their bellies. And if their bellies are empty, then they're willing to, as they say, have severely limited and distorted lives as a result of limited economic choices and opportunities. So, the political choices and rules and policies that allow that to be a viable opportunity, versus one that would sustain life and make life noble and have a noble existence. Like, we can choose to legislate a policy whether that [coal] energy choice versus clean technology. It is a choice. So, we can actually have those very workers working in a clean opportunity. Why have them wildcatting and drilling for oil when they could be offshore and laying the same technology but building offshore wind platforms? And so, instead of "drill, baby, drill" it would be "blow, baby, blow," and these same visions.

01-01:18:10

Mair:

It's taking and fusing people from just getting into narrow talk about, "Well, we just need clean energy." I go, "No, you've got to think of more than just clean energy. You've got to think of the entire lifecycle in the system," because this is what Zion has passed on to me, and this is what Barry—this is that whole existence of culture. You can't just think of the product. How was this product put together? How was it impacted? How was it used? How does it elevate us? How does it benefit us but not degrade us?

This approach is the approach that I've taken from this long history. And so, when you're polling how these threads come together—and it's no different than what Joseph LeConte did. Joseph LeConte had his rich, diverse background, but it didn't stop him from being a bomb maker and powder maker for the Confederacy. Joe LeConte had political views. Joe LeConte had a political theory of change and of life. He actually believed that African-Americans and Native Americans were inferior and separate and distinct races. He believed in his theory of life, which is that whites had a natural order and a higher chain of evolution over all things. He preached a theory of dominion over all things as opposed to stewardship of all things.

01-01:19:39

Mair:

So, if there is a miracle here, in this spooky thing here, then what Pharaoh gave us in Joe LeConte—who sought to use natural selection for man's dominion over creation and the planet—then Moses. [And] I am that David, through Moses, that has come to say, “No, you don't have dominion over things. We have stewardship over things.” As through Wendell Berry's wisdom.

And this is where the work [that I've done] and the lifelong reading and these things, how that enriches your soul and it gives you words and analytic lenses to tie these pieces together. But it also takes the crucible of life and being a descendant of slaves, trapped in this Canaan, to really see and fuse these things together, but also something as powerful as faith.

See the power of that book of Genesis, that it not only allowed my family to survive. Barry McKenzie lost his mind but allowed, still, the rest to survive and to withstand and have the capacity to endure the pain; but also from that pain bring forward a new Jerusalem and a way of leveraging that spirit and, as they say, migrating the family from a place of hell to a place where they would thrive. But also, all of the values from that toxic system of slavery, converting that to new values of raising and using those skills not to have dominion over other human beings, but to take their traditional values to heal that land and grow it for future generations. So these things came together from those diverse threads. I know we were talking with the earlier threads. But I definitely want [to] say, here, this is where a lot of these things tie together. These things are not hampered.

01-01:21:32

Mair:

But what was very unique and powerful about the opportunity about being president [of the Sierra Club] was, at that point in time [2015-2017], the crisis of humanity was anthropogenic climate change. And we needed a voice to enlist humanity. And what better voice to enlist humanity than that who is a descendant of slaves, whose ancestors saw the worst of humanity and the debasement of humanity? Who else could be a better lover of life and creation than the man whose ancestors were the stewards of naturalists at Caesars Head, who was a child in the Hudson Highlands, whose mother preserved

those same agriculture traditions, who made sure her children came back home to know where they come from, so they know where they have to go?

And so fate, faith, coincidence put me in the right place at the right time to be that eloquent voice for the joining and the enlistment of humanity. And through my life's example, and through my ancestry, through my heritage, speaking through that, in the prophetic voice, that is the gift of my family. Because one of the things that we moved from is Canaan. Through our exodus is the cornerstone of the Golden Grove Baptist Church. The role of stewardship, the role of moving from hate, evil, to that of salvation and elevation of family, through living harmoniously with the land and creation. And so, very powerful threads. And that is, for me, being in this place and space [at Hagood Mill]. And I know that's a lot of jumble, but I hope that we unpack this more.

01-01:23:38

Mair:

You have to look at the journals of the LeContes [Joseph LeConte, *The Autobiography of Joseph LeConte (1823-1901)*, published in 1903; Emma LeConte, *When the World Ended: The Diary of Emma LeConte (1864-1865)*, published in 1957]. And you have to look at the words of the Wendell Berrys. You have to look at Wendell Berry's brilliant *The Hidden Wound* [1970], which speaks from the other side of those still in power and having hegemony over people of color.

But, *I* am the wound. You cannot heal humanity if you don't deal with the wound. So when that wound takes hold of the [Sierra] Club, it is through that pain of experience and urgency of what awaits us if we don't pull together, and speak with an authentic and authoritative voice. Words and terms like "diversity" are not just terms.

But let me speak to you with specific instances and life-lived example. But let me speak to you from that of a deep space and place of an environmental steward. Let me speak to you from that voice that Wendell Berry says, "The perfect voice is that of the farmer." What do you hear not in my voice but a man who loves the land, but the descendant of farmers, the descendant of those who heal and live in harmony with the land?

01-01:25:34

Mair:

What powerful voice can then unite those rights and then tie and tell the story of why Zion McKenzie risked his life to pay \$2,281 in taxes so he could vote? So he could vote! Risk his life to vote! This is not a man seeking power. This is a former slave. The wealth is almost unfathomable. You had to spend [in today's equivalent amount of money] almost thirty or forty thousand dollars a year to vote! Because he knew the Emancipation rests not in the arbitrary whims of other men and women and their opinion. But he saw that Constitution and the power of that Constitution as something sacred. He saw the power of "the coming of the Lord" [from the "Battle Hymn of the

Republic”] in William Tecumseh Sherman when he brought the South to its knees. He saw and heard the voice of Father Abraham Lincoln make manifest in the darkest hour and raise up a Union. And when he saw that they prevailed over Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee, he says, “The higher elevation is not that I am a farmer, but I also become a steward of democracy.” And in that, this man risked his life to vote.

And the terrorism did come. They burned the second Golden Grove Baptist Church to the ground. They burned the third Golden Grove church. They burned it twice to the ground. The terrorism was real. The terrorism was real. But he paid the cost. He rose. The family sacrificed to raise the money to rebuild their churches. They sacrificed and raised the money to vote, to pass legislation no matter how much the pressure and terrorism to push against them—no different than we see today. No different than we see today, because when corporations control our democracy, they’re operating in corporate interests. They play up on themes and tropes of the ill-informed and the illiterate.

Zion McKenzie knew that literacy and education was the power of emancipation. It’s not an accident that the women in our family are educators, that the power of the word and scholarship and influence is a very critical part of one’s makeup. It’s a very critical part of mine. These are things that are not of imagination but of facts, that have been long forgotten but maintained, and then acting upon them, and threading them together, and being able to articulate them—not only in clear vision but even the point in having the allegory of getting people to see these things, not only for what they were, but also the prophetic side of seeing what will be and what can be.

01-01:28:28

Mair:

What we need now is that prophetic vision and seeing what is a world that is carbon-free, and evangelizing on that message and theme. But again, not from some choice, fancy pop culture-ism; but from history, but from lived lives, but from lived examples. And that is what speaks more than words.

So, in my presence as the president, the fifty-seventh president of the Sierra Club, it’s not that my words matter. The weight of my words came with the weight of my ancestors. I came with an old tradition. I came with my ancestors. And that’s the power of diversity, because whites have their culture and how they communicate. And Wendell Berry is eloquent in saying that that culture is failing humanity. Wendell Berry’s book [*The Unsettling of America*] is nothing more than a chronology of saying, “We have it wrong.” But in my tradition, my words, what I bring to the table, it’s bringing the possibility. And it can only happen through diversity.

So when they took the conscious and enlightened choice of electing me president, this is not, you know, “We need a Black guy around here.” No. First and foremost, to be a Sierra Club member of the Board of Directors you

have to compete nationally. You have to throw your hat in the ring nationally. You either win or you go up in flames. But people get to make a choice based upon your representation. And then amongst your peers, who have been elected nationally. You have to put your ideas and your truth and your experience—your vision—forward and have them evaluate all that you've done in your career as an environmentalist, as a human being, as a steward, and say, "Is this person who's one-fifteenth of us, is this the vision that we want to try? Is this the vision that we need right now? Do we have the faith to follow this?"

And I must say, developing that faith was part of the journey. Because I worked with the [Sierra] Club for over twenty-something years to develop its EJ [environmental justice] program. I worked with the Club sowing the seeds of showing the power of what we can do if we were a diverse and equitable and inclusive organization.

01-01:31:24

Mair:

Over the years, I was planting seeds like Zion and Barry McKenzie as they did in the fields here at Hagood Mill, knowing that the crop will come through. But also creating the mill that could grind up the grain, once the harvest comes in, into various grades of, as they say, flour and meal so that they can bake, cook, and eat from it. And then coming up with the recipes, just like they did at the Caesars Head Mountain and served some of the finest meals.

So I had to serve up the recipe of some of the finest ideas and actions. And once they consumed that meal, a number of my fifteen peers [on the Sierra Club's national Board of Directors] said, "This meal is good. We like what we taste here. This experience, this harvest, this investment, we can see where the diversity, equity, inclusion is going to go. We can actually see how the civil rights is very powerful and that healthy democracy is important, because we have been investing our money in litigating against environmental transgressions."

Why are we litigating when we can actually elect new lawyers, new doctors, new congressmen, new leaders, in a healthy democracy that's going to produce healthy legislation rather than litigating against bad? It is an efficient investment on the front end to engage in civil rights, to shape our choices and outcome of leaders who will create the legislation that we want rather than waiting for legislators to be willy-nilly elected, and then reacting to what they put upon the table, because corporations can outspend us.

01-01:33:43

Mair:

So in that journey, they said, "Listen, we want this man." In that vision, I was brought to be the fifty-seventh president of the Sierra Club. And through that journey, in me, you see the man whose weathered, grizzled features is that of the slave ancestors that I carry, the pain, the burden, all the risk. I have much

in common with the coal miner in West Virginia, the wildcatter in the Gulf Coast, the fisherman of Maine, but more importantly the Native American on sacred land. All these people, all these diverse streams of America that can either pull us together and save us, or pull us apart. And speaking from that unified voice, that pulpit, as if I were standing at the first Golden Grove Baptist Church, preaching and evangelizing on why we need to come together. And that is all connected. Think about it. I'm preaching the words of Dr. King, of the mutual dependency of humanity. I'm preaching the words and the environmental gospel of John Muir, that it is all connected.

This thread must now be woven into a quilt that will now protect humanity in the threat that is going to be coming in the form of anthropogenic climate change. Because at the end of the day, it is by our own hand this pestilence comes upon us. Pharaoh had rebelled and sinned against God. And he was warned that the next plague that comes upon him will come from his own mouth and by his own hand. And what better metaphorical curse than to see that climate change is that curse brought upon us by our doubts and our arrogance, that we somehow can deny it or wish it away.

And so, tapping in to the spirit of our family's Moses, of Zion McKenzie, now I must step forward into this place and space. And I'm going to be running again for the [Sierra Club] national Board [of Directors]. I will come back, to lead our people, to lead our nation, to get them to the promised land—but at least get them to the point of resilience and teach them and remind them of the resilience of our spirit. If you get them to see what Wendell Berry had tried to get them to see of our role, in our place and space, but more importantly to move the corrupting influence of corporations and the pursuit of mammon, money and material things that is also consuming us and destroying us.

01-01:35:55

Mair:

And we can live better than this. It's going to take all of us to get them to a place and space that human beings should be able to have the freedom of movement, to not see immigrants and others as "others," as if somebody has a special place. To see people march with the ghost of Robert E. Lee saying, "The Jews will not replace us"—we've seen this before in those very places. And we cannot sit idly by, because these are all forms of pollution, and those forms of pollution allow for the other forms of pollution. The corporate pollution of our democracy allows for the destruction of regulations that allows for the industrial corporations to have their way with this land and this planet in ways that none of us intend.

We have a human right to clean air. We have a human right to clean soil. And we have a human right to clean water. It is that right, and recognition of those rights, that my ancestors were able to save generations of our family. It was our stewardship of those very fundamental beliefs that allowed generations of our families to go from slavery on this land and make this man, Ben Hagood and his family, millionaires—but to still take that wisdom and to pass that

wealth on to the survival of our family. So what echoes in me are the ghosts and the voices of my ancestors who say, “Do this. You have what you need. We have given you the vision. You know the story. So, evangelize through your deeds, your acts, these words that you know are true.”

So, me being here [at Hagood Mill] in this place and space, and having the opportunity to be the president of one of the most powerful, largest environmental organizations, and to show the unified theory, because I think it’s the cure. Because our legacy is rooted in racism, bigotry and xenophobia. And out of that came some of the worst industrial pollutions and destructions of natural resources and humanity that has ever known. And we can do even worse. All the more reason why we must reach to these ancestors and hear their words and watch their actions and move their deeds to that next level.

So this place and space [the Hagood Mill], this existence, is metaphorical to all of our current and modern struggles. But they are also the tools and tactics that we need in resistance against what people think are insurmountable odds. If Zion McKenzie can rise to pay \$2,281 in poll taxes so that he can vote, at a point in time when you had the then-new Jim Crow laws that were terrorizing Blacks, forcing them out of the South into the urban centers that people now think are the ghettos of these days. These people had to lose their culture to flee. Zion didn’t run. Zion stayed, fought, survived. His resilience, his example, is manifest in all the things that I do and believe.

01-01:39:29

Eardley-Pryor: Can you maybe tell a little bit about what role the poll tax played in the story of African-Americans?

01-01:39:37

Mair: Sure. The poll tax laws worked hand in hand with what they called the anti-vagrancy laws and the rise of what would then become the modern police force. A lot of people don’t remember these things are all connected. So, what the poll tax did was to create a price for one’s civic duty that’s constitutionally mandated, the right to vote, to [the] franchise, and then mainly amongst males and taxed them, saying, “You have to vote. And, oh, by the way, you’ve got to pay a tax.”

And, for those who had money, if they had savings or whatever, this was one way that the South could bleed the wealth of the Blacks who were newly freed, who are now enjoying revenue for being paid for their wages, and bankrupt them, force them into a state of poverty so they have to go back to work on these plantations and farms. It was another way of forcing people of color back to a state of slavery. A tax was a tool to do that.

But it was not enough. You had to seize people’s land. If you didn’t pay taxes, then they put liens on your property or your animals. They take your land. They take your animals because that was one of the ways that they redeemed

this money. And what were these taxes used for? These taxes were used to rebuild a war-torn South that the Blacks did not tear up. These folks, it was torn by their own hands. They paid for white service veterans who fought a war to try to keep Blacks enslaved. So, this tax was a major source of revenue and wealth transfer from African-Americans to whites and former slave owners, number one.

01-01:41:35

Mair:

And then if they didn't pay it, they lost their land. They lost their wealth, and liens were put against them. The other power, too, is that if they didn't pay it, they could not vote. So, all of a sudden, the poll tax was a tool of voter suppression. So, it had a number of, as they say, the bang and benefit. This thing, this one simple tool, was able to ruin people financially, deny them the right to vote, and cause the seizure of their land because they did not pay their taxes.

When people don't pay their taxes, the government comes after you. And so, the South during Reconstruction, after the Hayes-Tilden Compromise—Rutherford B. Hayes had turned everything back over to the South—the South immediately passed Jim Crow laws. And these Jim Crow laws gave these unreasonable taxes. They literacy-tested the polls, et cetera, a whole bunch of things. In Florida, in fact, they just voted to overturn the felon because one of the things—you know, pay your taxes. They have the power to declare, depending on how many times or whatever, they can declare you a felon. You can actually get a felony. Or, one resulting consequence is, if you lost your land and had your land seized, you became homeless. So now you became a vagrant.

And naturally, when they had to now hire a whole bunch of lawmen, this is where a lot of your county sheriffs. And all these people were hired, they start rounding up Blacks. And one of the features that you notice from the late nineteenth century all the way through the twentieth century: all these big chain gangs. Everybody's all, "Oh, Blacks are criminals. They're always walking around. They're lazy and shiftless and doing nothing." Well, if you just came off of being a slave, and then having jobs and income and having your wealth and everything stripped away, that's a lot of psychological trauma.

01-01:43:33

Mair:

And then on top of that, you're being arrested for vagrancy because you're now homeless. And then, you then were put on a chain gang to basically build county roads, hospitals, government—in fact, the cleaning up of the South in the wake of the destruction of the Civil War. Chain gangs were created as a result of poll taxes in the anti-vagrancy laws. So once people had nowhere to go, they were rounded up. And they were the ones who were then used to rebuild the South.

So, their wealth was taken away to rebuild the South. Their labor was taken away to rebuild the South. But also a new police force came up and rose out of this, to police this new threat. Now [in 2018], the threat is allegedly the mythical immigrants that are going to run across the border. The threat then, [during Reconstruction], were these Black bands roving and loitering in our streets who were now homeless and walking around. So you had to round them up.

01-01:44:35

Mair:

And so, these poll taxes were very, very destructive tools and weapons in the form of white terror. That's on the government side. And on the back end, on the dark side, you had the Ku Klux Klan. And so between the Klan and official government action, the effect of legal terrorism and radical white terrorism in the form of violence from the Klan, tens of thousands of Blacks, millions of Blacks, migrated out of the South to the North, which created new tensions. Because as they were fleeing the South and going north, because now they no longer—when they went north, what was their skill set? They were farmers.

So, all of a sudden all these farmers are flooding all these urban areas, and they become the cheapest menial labor. In fact, they flood the labor market so much that even cheap immigrant labor is too expensive. You now had these Blacks. So, in 1919, the Red Summer of 1919, the various race riots—they talk about Blacks. All these riots all of a sudden erupted across the nation, whereby these urban centers pretty much went up in flames. But these terrorized families that were forced to migrate—farmers who were forced to migrate out of the South to populate the North—still had to work for a living. They didn't go up to freeload. They went up to compete, and through competition, through their labor, unleashed even more violence on them in the North, [like] lynching. Violence against them because they were a source of cheap labor was another form of threat and risk. The poll tax was a very critical piece of that institution.

01-01:46:30

Mair:

So, most folks, they hear about it. They talk about it. But most people don't get to actually see a poll tax. And I tell people it's not an accident that there are not libraries with volumes of these, because they would be a powerful genealogy tool if they were available. But the reason why they don't is because nobody wants records of this. You don't want records of very serious crimes. So, those families who are able to have these records, it's very rare. Poll taxes did fall off and get cheaper, but what's rare is finding poll taxes from Reconstruction era. This is what makes this rare, because this price is an aberration. You see it, and—

It's kind of funny, because when I became president of the Sierra Club, I was given honor for my activism but also because of my family's long connection to South Carolina. The word spread that I'm still considered a native, that I

had South Carolina roots. And it's only natural that local communities will want to connect on that. And so the county and city of Greenville gave me the honor, gave me the key to the city. It was very powerful for me to go to Greenville and to not only accept this honor—and Greenville is doing a lot of great things, from cool and green cities. It's literally doing a lot of innovative things from smart cities, walkable cities. It's doing all the right things, and it's a huge draw.

So, I had to give a talk. And I had to give also the candid talk in the room, because most people, they say, "We want to sweep all that other stuff under the rug," and you don't want to make people feel weird. But when you're put in this place and space—and as I said, my calling was to push this diversity and push the bigger theory—I had to tell the truth. Because a lot of these folks that were there, even the mayor and the county executive that were present, they kind of thought that a Black guy being an environmentalist was a novelty type of thing. And you could kind of hear, a lot of times you hear people's tone. They think that Sierra Club is just doing a little affirmative action. No. You have to tell people, "No, I was voted, first and foremost. You have to run on a platform."

01-01:49:06

Eardley-Pryor: You earned it.

01-01:49:08

Mair:

So when you tell them that, they lean forward. They're like, "Really?" It's not like there was some group of whites that wanted to be nice. No, I had to earn it. And then, you had to talk the story about environmental justice, and you talk about how you got into the movement. And I even went one better. I actually had these records [of Zion McKenzie's poll tax], and I showed these records at this meeting. I had it up on the big PowerPoint so they all could see it. And one of the gentlemen that was inside of the audience, the sheriff that's listed on here, the county treasurer that enforces, that was his ancestral grandfather.

And, it was kind of interesting, because it was a jaw-dropping moment. The mayor of Greenville said, "That can't be right." And he went up and he goes, "Jesus Christ." He was reading it, and he just kept reading it. And even for him, the lost memory of these things—because again, he's a Republican, and they have their myths. So when he could see the document, you could see him transformed in that instant. And his entire tone, his entire demeanor, changed and was transformed by the power of a historical fact. And it couldn't be planned. And to have a fellow Sierra Club member and cyclist be there and have him, "Oh my God!" It's that powerful.

01-01:50:50

Eardley-Pryor: Talk about those strings of connection, that everything's connected! There it was in person.

01-01:50:54

Mair: And, this is a South Carolina fact. This is a fact that is right here, that they can tangibly touch. And he knows the consequence when he saw the price of that document. He knew that was an instrument of terrorism. He knew that that was a tool of subjugation, the power of government being one of the forces. If captured by people with those ideological bends, it can do evil things. And you could see that. And we're on the precipice of that even right now in modern days and times.

01-01:51:31

Eardley-Pryor: What do you mean?

01-01:51:32

Mair: Well, right now you have a president calling for laws—

01-01:51:37

Eardley-Pryor: A U.S. President, not a Sierra Club president.

01-01:51:39

Mair: A U.S. President [Donald Trump] calling for laws that go after mythical unproven facts. There's no voting fraud, but he's actually creating it out of whole cloth. He's making pronouncements and declarations. And then he's calling for Executive Orders and actions if he can't get legislation to enforce and protect from acts from minorities, because you've got to protect people from something—whether it's this fake immigrant horde, whether it is Blacks getting preferential treatment over whites. He's dealing in all these tropes.

And so, we're seeing these lawsuits going up using other ethnic minorities. Whites are financing lawsuits right now, for example at Harvard, to say that Blacks and affirmative action are getting preference over Asians. So you're creating tension between Blacks and Asians. And the person that's defending the Asians is this white person. So it's an insidious form of actions that are going forward.

And these are no different than these old tropes from yesterday. The coded language of nationalism, it's very specific. We know exactly what [President Trump is] speaking of because that's the same coded language that the South used to use in tearing down and trying to split away from the Union. It's the same myths and blood libels that they've used against Blacks since the days of slavery—that they've got to protect the white women from these minorities, and the threats and risks in how police right now—with these white females who are calling the cops for the craziest of things, whether it's a kid selling soda pop on a corner or a Black woman parking her car—the police actually come. And the police actually engage the person that is told, usually a Black person, that they're the threat. But the white person who's called them for such a frivolous act is not questioned, ticketed, or whatever. These are the double standards, and it's these things that are coming out now in this day and time that mirror these tactics and these tools [historically]. So, I've been able

to point to these tactics and tools. This is what scared Blacks off of the land. This is what's forcing poor whites into jobs like going into coal, because they've got these rules, these regulations.

01-01:54:22

Mair:

If you're told that you don't have to maintain a pension—because one of the rules that were changed in the eighties under Ronald Reagan was the ruling that the pensions that were negotiated on the contract with jobs that provided for medical and economic pensions, they were then [fungible]. Before, they had to be protected. If a company went bankrupt, there had to be separate trust funds to provide for their workers, as the contract dictated. But this rule was changed whereby they became assets of the company. So that allowed for the growth of a new industry called leveraged buyouts. They're these equity firms that literally go out and buy these companies that are 100 years old, 200 years old, they have these massive pension equity funds, who then go bankrupt. And under bankruptcy, they can now seize the corporate asset of a pension and line their pockets and become super-wealthy by liquidating the asset of these laborers that had worked for generations at these plants and mills. And they hollow these companies out with the added insult of debt. And they sell them off to foreign companies, and they then go overseas.

These tactics and tools then create a desperate state amongst workers, a level of insecurity, and two things happen. They then pit these workers against other workers. And so, if you don't have a pension—these corporations had used their dollars to shape democracy and legislation, to give them the power to have it now ruled as an asset of theirs. They're now having these same politicians saying, "Those who have pensions, who are left with pensions, are called Cadillac pensions." And all of a sudden a person with a pension is pitted against a person who does not have a pension, as if it's the person with the pension's fault that you don't have a pension. So it becomes this ugly racist spiral to the bottom. But the person who incited that whole dialectic and argument, nobody's holding them accountable. That's deemed, "Well, wait a minute. That's good business sense," or whatever. But the point of the matter is, it puts labor at a disadvantage.

And what's sad is that you can absolutely get the poor and disenfranchised to vote against [their] interest because it's an issue of literacy. This is why, going to this current president [Donald Trump], when he says, "I like ill-informed people," there's a reason why. An ill-informed person does not know their rights, by definition. They do not even know the power of their rights or the power of the consequence if they exercise their rights in a way that undermines their interest.

01-01:57:06

Mair:

And they're going to go after, through legislation, those institutions that actually allow people to learn about their rights. And so, the defunding of education, the creating of vouchers and all these other tools and tactics of

governance, are designed to make us worse off, not better off. And when people are reduced to a state of ignorance and desperation, that's when things can become quite toxic. And that's when people can start calling for more "Drill, baby, drill" and "Let's go burn more coal and oil."

And when these very same people destroy the assets that we've—in so far as good science so that people can actually learn from their past mistakes, the combination and the totality of all these actions as they come together is the destruction of our democracy and civil society as we know it.

01-01:57:57

Eardley-Pryor: This seems to me like a good place to take a break.

Interview 2: November 11, 2018

02-00:00:01

Eardley-Pryor: This is our second session [of an] oral history interview with Aaron Mair. Today is November 11, [2018], Sunday. We're in the home of Hattie Estella?

02-00:00:12

Mair: Mm-hmm, Hattie Estella Greene.

02-00:00:12

Eardley-Pryor: Hattie Estella Greene, just outside Greenville, in Travelers Rest, South Carolina. I am Roger Eardley-Pryor from the Oral History Center at the Bancroft Library.

Aaron, yesterday, you gave a really powerful narrative with your distant, distant ancestor who arose from slavery to lay a foundation for your family's growth and development in this new free world for them. That was Zion [McKenzie]. And that line traces all the way through to your mother, Margaret Elizabeth McKenzie. There's a lot of family in between there. Can you tell me a little bit some of their lives?

02-00:00:45

Mair: Well, a little bit. The answer is yes. And the other fun piece of where we're recording at right now in Bates, and within Bates, we're in Greenville County. We're in the municipality, which is a large area of Travelers Rest, which they say TR. And that's a larger geographic [division]. It's definitely the city of Travelers Rest, but then it's also defined as a minor civil division. But within that, it's called Marietta, so [if] people were looking [it] up, you'll find Marietta; within that, you've got Bates. Bates, Marietta, and then, to the family, we call this Golden Grove. So when people say Travelers Rest and they go, "Whereabouts," you say, "Golden Grove."

It's kind of interesting. A lot of old Black families and old Black communities in the South, they defined their communities in the names of the churches and their faith community that they come from. And Golden Grove has been the faith community of our family since slavery. We had the opportunity [yesterday] to tour and see the foundation of the cemetery where the first Golden Grove Church was [near the Hagood Mill site]. We will, later today, perhaps, go on up and see where the fourth installation of the [Golden Grove] Church, because the other two churches in between were burned down in periods of racial hostility, marking the events of their time as our society struggled with desegregation, struggled with civil rights, equal rights, equal-education rights.

In fact, the third Golden Grove Church was burnt down twice. Actually, one time was during the [nineteen] seventies, and the other time was during *Brown v. Board of Education* [in the nineteen fifties]. So it's kind of interesting. *Brown v. Board of Education*, where you had a very powerful

period of giving Blacks access to education, which led to the firebombing of our family church; and then desegregation during 1976, which is kind of interesting. It's that bicentennial, while people think iconically of a Black lawyer in Boston being stabbed with an American flag, our family church was firebombed, and a lot of documents and precious records were lost. And the church where it's built right now in the Golden Grove Community is the fourth installation of the congregation. It's in the centermost part of the family community lands—all this land was owned by Zion McKenzie—and it's a much more defensible position.

02-00:03:18

Mair:

So it's not as simple as saying, "We are here at so-and-so's house." This house stands up on ground that also reflects that long struggle. But this is the Israel. This is the new Jerusalem for our family. And, this is where Zion McKenzie, who is not only the Moses, but he also became the St. Peter because he erected those churches from his childhood in slavery that we witnessed [yesterday] over at Hagood Mill. The most immediate thing that he did after planting his crops to feed his family was to also have a place in which to worship. And that was carrying that congregation of Golden Grove from Hagood Mill in Pickens in South Carolina, over here to Marietta, Bates, within Travelers Rest, which is within the northwestern part of Greenville County.

02-00:04:37

Eardley-Pryor:

How was Zion able to—and generations hence able to—maintain their title on the land over these multiple generations, especially in the wake of these burnings and the deeds and the documents being lost?

02-00:04:49

Mair:

Well, not only that. There were other pressures. Zion had to pay very heavy taxes.

02-00:04:59

Eardley-Pryor:

Yes, you mentioned the poll taxes yesterday.

02-00:05:00

Mair:

And these were poll taxes and other taxes that were systematically designed to remove African-Americans, newly minted citizens, from their land. And the use, again, of so-called just laws, legal laws. Follow the laws—the same way the rhetorical device of things being legal or illegal, that they're right now dealing with the immigration crisis, that the right wing uses when trying to define its position as just on moral ground. They try to say, "Well, this is the law," and people tend to flip between that and never analyze really what they're saying.

So paying taxes, "Everybody should always pay their taxes." That's the mnemonic that they break it down to. But the real issue is, why was this tax versus other taxes in public? Taxes are the means by which governments raise

revenue to finance necessary services to provide for general civic society and government function. And government function is not for the sake of government but for the sake of the *people*. So taxes are something that are essential to building a more perfect union and a more inclusive and just civil society, if they're levied equitably, fairly, progressively.

02-00:06:25

Mair:

For our family, taxes were amongst the big block. It's later generations that we understood, and we come to understand, that these were also part and parcel of the tools of systemic and institutional racism. Because, like any law—the laws that made us slaves, the law that defined us as three-fifths of a human being—we found that laws can be legislated to create inequality, just as they can be legislated to create equality. So, the term “law” and “lawful” is just that: a term. The technical issue—of what the consequences are—are things that people don't tend to think about.

So the power of taxes is very, very important. It's been one of those tools designed, and can be designed, to shift wealth from one section of the population to another. They can absolutely advance and elevate the goods by basically spreading the needs of the costs of managing civil society over all human beings. Or, they can be used to create disparities. Now, the wealthy would say, “Well, you're taking all the money from us and giving it to the poor.” Well, the answer at the end of the day is that, through progressive taxation, the smoothing effect, governments are not making businesses poorer.

02-00:08:19

Mair:

But people fail to also point out that we had over a ninety-percent-on-the-wealthy progressive tax rate. And that ninety percent wealth tax rate financed the absolute creation of the middle class. The middle classes did not spring out of the ether. And the middle class did not just spring out of businesses doing business or capitalism being capitalism. That sprang out of progressive legislation and policy. If they want to know what capitalism being capitalism was, you go back to the Industrial Revolution when we had the robber barons, which basically almost destroyed the planet and the land, which gave rise to the foundation of the Sierra Club.

This rise of the foundation of Sierra Club was recognition that all of our natural resources were being plundered for the expanse of industrialization of America. Trees were being clear-cut from forests to finance the structures and timbers of massive factories and industry, if not just downright firewood. So, we know that naked capitalism gave rise and call for the protection of what was once wild and unique about America. It's what moved Joe LeConte. It's what moved John Muir to get Teddy Roosevelt, who came from one of the old and wealthy families, to come and see what was being lost in America due to rampant, unchecked capitalism.

02-00:09:45

Mair:

So, we need to get these things in balance because people tend to think that, as you ascribed good to certain conditions, that all good flowed from that. No, it flowed from actually progressive taxation. And then the pinnacle of that, which allowed for all Americans once they got to the middle class, they were able to experience more leisure time. And from that leisure time they now had the ability, the capacity, and the means to go out and take stock of our natural wonders—in the same way as Benjamin Hagood and his family did with Caesars Head. Again, slavery created the economic flow and wealth amongst the genteel upper crust and the aristocratic class and caste in South Carolina to allow that property, the money class, to take stock through their leisure time of nature and God's great creation.

02-00:10:37

Eardley-Pryor:

Tell me a little bit about Caesars Head. You've mentioned this a few times, but can you unpack what this place was and what role it played in intersecting with your family?

02-00:10:43

Mair:

Sure. Caesars Head and Caesars Head Mountain is right in Greenville. It's probably the northwest portion of Greenville County. And Caesars Head was a parcel of land that was bought by Benjamin Hagood, who was the slave-master and owner of my ancestors. And, this is a gentleman who had the genius—and again, Hagood Mill was, again, more than just a mill. And the twelve-mile plantation in which my ancestors were enslaved on was more than just a plantation. It was not a place where they just grew cotton. They grew everything. And the highly skilled slaves produced very significant finished goods and raw materials that allowed buildings to be built, everything from bricks to lumber, leather. They ground the grain for farmers all around. They did all these things.

And that wealth allowed Benjamin to rise to a point and status where he ran for political office, [as] a typical planter of his day. He then skewed all the direction of and shape where then new roads and highways were going to be going and growing. And this is one of the things you could start to see the intersection of wealth and capital to shaping laws. So, all the major roads at that time passed right by his property. When my ancestors went from bondage to this new Jerusalem here in this Golden Grove community of Marietta and Bates outside of Travelers Rest, they went right across something called Hagood Bridge. So, it was very major.

As I said, those roads that intersected the highways back then—and this is the mid-nineteenth century, he used his role and his political influence. When they said, "Well, where have the roads got to be?" All of these things are decided by legislatures. This is about land-use and zoning. And you find that a lot of major roads in the South, even the northeast, even railroads, the owners of these things made sure their investment, or even the taxpayers' investment

in these structures and infrastructure development, flowed right past their property.

02-00:13:01

Mair:

And, so while in the South Carolina legislature, and as he was generating this mass amount of wealth, he took stock. You have the ability now with that wealth to have a little bit more leisure time. So, while somebody is enslaved, creating your wealth, you now have expansive leisure time because the work of the day you don't have to worry about. And that's also true of Joseph LeConte as well, because those slaves on his plantation—

02-00:13:28

Eardley-Pryor:

Here in South Carolina?

02-00:13:29

Mair:

Here in South Carolina, those slaves on his plantation allowed [Joseph LeConte] the leisure time to study, allowed his daughters the leisure time to grow up and become curious and educated, enlightened women within the structures of their order of their day. They did not have to worry about cooking, cleaning, providing fuel for maintaining the fires. They didn't even have to maintain the fires to warm their home.

So think about what it takes every human being, what you do in a day. And imagine what happens if you had another human being doing all of the laborious things, where all you had to do was rise out of bed, go to a table and have the food prepared for you, everything but somebody spoon-feeding you. And depending on what your wealth and class situation, even that happened. In fact, in some cases like Pharaoh, the slaves were there, what they called manservants or body servants for men and women, literally to dress you. You didn't even have to comb your hair. They had slaves to brush and comb your hair. It was that amazing. But, think about all the things that you do and all these places and spaces slaves filled.

So, when Benjamin Hagood, looking at this wealth and this leisure time—and that him being of the South Carolinian, upper-crust, slave-owning society, and one of the big-moneyed families here in Pickens County—he started looking at other ways to diversify his business and create more wealth.

And one can go to Cherokee Foothills in the Blue Ridge Mountains and clearly understand why the natural beauty, the stunning natural beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains—we're right here on the lower end of the Blue Ridge Mountains, which makes this God's country. You cannot but be humbled by the flora and fauna here. And so, my ancestors, who were enslaved here perhaps, while they had to deal with the burden of the drudgery of their chores and the things that they had to do, *they* really took stock, and *they* lived and loved this land just as much as the owners did.

02-00:15:49

Mair:

You think about the pain of slavery, and what is the salve that soothes the wound of slavery or the daily grind of slavery? And I would say, as one's driving the cattle from Twelve Mile Plantation to the top of Caesars Head, you can see the beauty. And as you're riding and walking and driving, that just takes away that burden of being a slave. So, Caesars Head was important for a couple of reasons. Not only did Benjamin Hagood recognize at the summit of Caesars Head Mountain you can take stock of the whole lower Blue Ridge Mountain valley, and it's just stunning. It's just a treasure to behold. Every place has its unique features, and this corner of South Carolina, looking into North Carolina, it is just stunning from that massive summit.

02-00:16:41

Eardley-Pryor:

And it's a state park today.

02-00:16:42

Mair:

It's a state park today. It is a state treasure today. But it's a state historic park in the sense that, when we talk about the early conservation movement, these are the scenic places and wonders that they preserve. And so, Benjamin Hagood, knowing about the leisure time that the wealth and upper crust had, but also their consumption of the natural wonders and naturalism, which was really the buzz of the day, it was a perfect spot to set up an inn, to allow scholars, poets, writers, historians—it's a place where one can come and gather one's thoughts, but also do that in the context and the backdrop of nature, and probably some of the most stunning and scenic views. And so, he had two purposes. And this is the kind of guy that Ben Hagood and the genius that he is.

02-00:17:38

Eardley-Pryor:

And this is the 1850s, around?

02-00:17:39

Mair:

This is 1840s to 1850s. So, the kind of genius that Ben Hagood had was that—two things. If you know about the heat in South Carolina, the summer months came. You had to move your cattle, your livestock, to places where they could be cool. And so, one of the things is driving the cattle up to the summit in the shade of those trees, and the elevation drops the temperature significantly so that you're grazing. So he had his livestock, from which he made his leather goods as well as produced the beef and all the other meat. Again, the livestock produced a whole range of products, number one.

But you had to be a steward of that livestock. So, you'll hear the legend of Ben Hagood and the cattle drives and the livestock drives that he would take up to the summit. And all the springs along Caesars Head, this is where the cattle would graze and drink water. But it's just sheer genius. It was part of his operation that just not a detail was lost to this man and opportunity. So, he made sure the roads were put in when the opportunity [because he] has this power in the legislature. But my ancestors would drive those cattle.

02-00:18:56

Eardley-Pryor: It wasn't Ben Hagood driving the cattle.

02-00:18:57

Mair:

It wasn't Ben Hagood. It's kind of funny. You hear the legends and myths of what white men and women did in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and what they called "the building of this nation." I tell people they may have been the Pharaohs of this nation. But the actual building of this nation usually was on the back of slaves. And my ancestors were those people who were cutting the roads, splitting the rocks, preparing the food. All that was on the back of slavery.

So, it's kind of fascinating, but you really get an appreciation of what it took to create one of the state's and one of the country's earliest places where naturalists and environmentalists—they weren't called environmentalists then. They were called naturalists. They would go out and take advantage and take stock and write poetry, document the birds and the flora and fauna. This is was one of the earliest places in which [there was] an eco-tourist industry. If you want to do history of eco-tourism, you cannot do that without writing about Caesars Head, and a natural wonder that was protected and preserved for the beauty that it is.

And it's a very integral part of the state of South Carolina's environmental portfolio and beautiful assets and gems. You can then see why Ben Hagood invested in this place. But you can also appreciate his forward-thinking, entrepreneurial vision in preserving this place and space. It's served many purposes. It's served a purpose that allowed his livestock to progress. But also he saw an opportunity and a way to monetize it. And that's one of those weird little things. A lot of folks get into how do you make money off of something. And some things are priceless. At the end of the day we have this wonderful asset.

02-00:20:38

Mair:

But the back-story behind the asset: every now and then, if you get some of the earlier photos of Hagood and his wife Adeline, and you'll see Blacks in the background of the old Hagood Inn at Caesars Head. You'll see the Black staff in the background or in the distances. Those were my ancestors.

What made that place the five-star place, that made it the experience by which Ben Hagood can go up and give his winding oratory and lectures, [as if] he was doing laboring and all that. People were just praising him for his pioneering spirit, his entrepreneurial spirit. But the engine, or the capital, was not just his money. It was the human capital of slavery. And human capital is property in human beings. And then the wealth that is even tripled by having absolute property [in] human beings. That human capital behind that entire operation and venture were my ancestors.

Zion, his father, his brothers, his sisters, his mother, these were the people. People. When you look at Benjamin Hagood, you look at the wealth he created, and you would swear that he might have had 1,000 slaves. And it literally was a portfolio of about forty slaves, forty high-skilled, jack-of-all-trade slaves. And they did everything, everything from preparing the food, preparing products, make all these things.

02-00:22:30

Mair:

But they also were the guides. They were the ones who knew the trails. They were the ones who could take you to the various spots so that the tourists could see and truly enjoy. And they had to step up to take you to a particular location. When you got there, they had to fade into the background so you, the white person, can enjoy and see and document and draw sketches of the flora and fauna. But, they were the ones to make that happen.

So, when we talk about environmentalism in the current sense, we talk about how a lot of folks feel that environmentalism is what whites contributed. But if you talk about the early places and spaces—whether it's the Native American guides out west, or the slave guides in the East Coast or in the deep South—you find people of color that were very integral. They were the people. You can't talk about the Lewis and Clark expedition without Native Americans.

02-00:23:21

Eardley-Pryor:

Or buffalo soldiers out west who knew the land.

02-00:23:23

Mair:

Or the buffalo soldiers out west. And so, when we talk about environmental justice, it's on many fronts. It's not just the toxicities and things that are by law, in legislation—again, going back to the point of how laws can create inequality. But, it is also about the assets of the environment and the environmental movement and the conservation movement, how people of color were always present. It was the racism, the institutional racism, that put them in the back—as the pack-horses, the mules, and as the equipment, rather than those folks who were the production crew, who were the gaffs, the grips. If we think about, you would never have a motion picture without the countless thousands of artists and wire and electricians that really allowed Cecil B. DeMille to create his production—or you to create your production, but you're your own pack horse. But the point of what I'm trying to get at, metaphorically, is what it takes to create an experience, and that, because of environmental—

02-00:24:28

Eardley-Pryor:

And a movement eventually, what became an environmental movement.

02-00:24:30

Mair:

It would become a movement. But even the experience—before it became the movement—to fight against the inequality of institutional racism. Before we

start to connect these things back to get a 360-degree view, back to that early 180-degree view of what was conservation and environmentalism and naturalism, and that whole experience at that point. They were only able to get a 180-degree experience of the environment because the other 180 degrees that was missing were the slaves and people of color that made that experience happen.

And when you start to then look back and say, where would Lewis and Clark got to if they did not have their Native American guides? How would we have explored all these great territories and expanses? Who first showed them these natural wonders or these great rivers or these great peaks and these special places? And it's not an accident that we see, as we go west, that you see the heritage and the long legacy, the thousand-year-old settlements or 10,000-year-old settlements of Native Americans—which are being pillaged and have been pillaged since the days they were presented to the west—to see these natural wonders and see where older civilizations settled and why they settled there.

These things get lost to the fact that people use it as a check box, that you've been to this place and space. But, environmental racism and institutional racism allows people to compartmentalize and segment it. And one of the things about the environmental justice movement, that [it] has brought to enrich this rich diversity, coming back to really get people to think about conservation and naturalism and environmental protection in a broad and inclusive sense. It's the full 360 experience. It's now not just taking in the 180 [degree] experience of whites and what they desire and deem that should be protected, memorialized, and set aside, and studied. But it's taking in that other 180 degrees of those who were part and parcel of creating that environmental history, that conservation history, that natural history. Those were the people in the shadows, in the backgrounds, that made that happen.

02-00:26:42

Mair:

And so, the amazing thing about the environmental justice movement, not only did it deal with the issues of toxicity, waste and race, and how negative amenities are cited in people-of-color communities, but it is being corrective in so many ways. It's the synergy and robust space. It allowed for people of color to fully come in and articulate and express their voice, but also connect the environmental movement, the conservation movement, the naturalist movement, to the bigger context and the bigger picture. What enabled these things to happen? What allowed these things to happen? It was slaves and their labor and their efforts that made Joseph LeConte, gave him the luxury to be who he was; that allowed Benjamin Hagood to be who he was, and to create some of the most historic and scenic, natural-conservation points and wonders.

The only thing that's missing is on the back and on the blood of who. And that's a very insignificant piece and story. So, my journey into the Sierra Club,

while I came through the pathway of the environmental justice movement, little did I know at the time that I would find the threads that John Muir spoke of, that allowed me to pull at it, and tug it, and see how it's connected and then share that opportunity and that epiphany in this illustration of, as they say, the path that John Muir set—you know, taking that journey, going into the wild, going into the wild places and spaces.

02-00:28:23

Mair:

And so, I was able to go from an industrial, urbanized setting and upbringing that I was raised in, [as well as] the southern roots and heritage and culture which were preserved by my maternal side, but take all of that through this experience—and through the ashes of an incinerator, which coated the lungs of my children and my family—to connect a broader history and take our movement to a deeper place.

This is where being the president of Sierra Club and being an activist within the Sierra Club allowed me to bring and blend these stories. When I first came to the Sierra Club in seeking help, I was turned away. I was presenting a case with regards to solid waste and solid-waste management and the burning of garbage. And little did I know that I would be able to tell the broader story. So, through that initial rejection and turning away, I was able to come back.

It was a Caucasian fellow who brought me there to seek assistance from the Sierra Club—a fellow by the name of Roger Gray, who was able to witness what happened in my treatment when I first came through the door to seek assistance from the Sierra Club and Sierra Club activists. Then, I did not know the complexities of the Sierra Club. But still, be it as it may, when people first experience the Sierra Club, they don't know the difference between a local group or state chapter or national. They just see the whole brand.

02-00:29:59

Mair:

So, in that context of me seeing the whole brand and my experience, my first point or first contact [with the Sierra Club], it was definitely like the Native Americans opening their homes to the pilgrims, only to be attacked by them. But, you still had the compassion amongst those pilgrims who did not like what a lot of their brethren were doing. And Roger Gray was just like that, and he came back. And he made his offering. He truly embodied what his vision of the Sierra Club was. And that allowed me a pathway to come in. And that pathway, when it came in, again I was initially narrowly focused on the issue of an incineration of solid waste, and that the Sierra Club would be the banner agency to go to.

02-00:30:44

Eardley-Pryor:

And this is the eighties, 1980s, up in Albany?

02-00:30:45

Mair:

This is 1987. Actually, I came to them, I want to say, '89, '90. So, this is the early—1987, we were still—'87 to, I would say, '90, it was the mobilization

of the community in building awareness—and then identifying the polluter, and then building a movement to take on that polluter. And by that [time from 1987 to 1990], we weren't building a movement then. We were just basically mobilizing the community.

And the way and the tactics and the tools that we used to mobilize the community then is what African-Americans have always done. You turn to your civil rights roots. So, you use your civil rights tools and tactics of mobilizing and organizing. And that's how you pull together a community. And it's from [my] foundation as a civil rights [activist] and a son of a labor rights organizer, you use those tools, and that's what you knock on the door with.

But one of the tools you learn is you know how to get help. And you then do an analysis of who's the best to help you. You need an environmental organization. And, who's the biggest, greenest gorilla? The Sierra Club. And so, these logical steps led us to the door of the Sierra Club.

02-00:32:02

Eardley-Pryor: Before we go too much into that, because we'll go into detail [later], but take me back. You just made mention there of being the son of a labor rights organizer. We've not heard much about your father's side of the family.

02-00:32:15

Mair: This thread, when you're on these threads—and it's good sharing this because these threads take you to very other powerful threads. But yes, it's all part of a quilt. And the fabric, when you look at all the other threads and they come through, it's the mesh of these things.

02-00:32:31

Eardley-Pryor: What's your father's name?

02-00:32:32

Mair: My father's name is Arnold George Mair—Arnold George Mair *Jr.* And if there was anything, a bone between a father and a son—I may have had two or three. But the first one was that, “Dad, why didn't you name me Arnold?” And my father's like the typical man: “I hated my name. And I did not want to burden you with that name.”

And because I'm my mother's son, my father, his family are Ellis Island emigrants. They're emigrants that come from the island of Jamaica. And, their story in the Americas and their experience is African, Caribbean. It's a very powerful and unique one. But, yes, my father, he grew up—he's first-generation New Yorker.

02-00:33:26

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, his parents came from Jamaica?

02-00:33:27

Mair: Yes. And so, he had a very strict, Anglican Episcopalian background. They were Anglicans.

02-00:33:38

Eardley-Pryor: Where did they settle when they came through Ellis Island?

02-00:33:40

Mair: Well, they settled in Harlem, New York. There's a large Jamaican immigrant community that settled in Harlem. And so, that whole 135th Street, I would say, 8th Avenue, that little block up there, on the East River side, migrating all the way over through the heights, in the Harlem Heights, West Harlem, what have you. So that whole area was thriving, entrepreneurial, then mostly Jamaican and descendants of African slaves who were coming from the Great Migration. You had two cultures converging in Harlem at that time that would drive the [Harlem] Renaissance.

02-00:34:33

Eardley-Pryor: When you say "at that time," when did his parents come up?

02-00:34:36

Mair: My grandfather, Arnold George Mair Sr., came at the end of World War I. Arnold George Mair Sr., he was a veteran in the British West India Army Regiment. He was part of England's BWIR appeal when they realized that World War I was not going to be a cakewalk. They then had to turn to their empire, which really made it a world war because the sun never set back then on the British Empire. And, the whole British West India Regiment, which is basically all of the former colonies in the Americas and the Caribbean, they pulled troops from them and assembled them into what they called the British West India Regiment.

And so, the various sub-regiments or units were by country. Jamaica was one of the largest suppliers of troops, and they served all the way from North Africa all the way through Paris. And North Africa, you hear about T.E. Lawrence and "Lawrence of Arabia." But the other part of Lord Allenby's command or broader command was the British West India Regiment. And they were really like the shock troops of the British Empire. They served under some very oppressive racism, and they were trying, as men, to prove themselves and prove their equality through their valor and fighting.

They were very fierce fighters. And they were men unlike the African-American males in the United States. These are folks who had been emancipated or free since 1830, 1831. So they already had two to three generations of freedom. But more importantly, in their institution of slavery, there had to be mandatory baptism and having full names.

02-00:36:38

Eardley-Pryor: It's a different institution of slavery.

02-00:36:39

Mair:

It's entirely different. While they had property in man, you still had basic human rights and Christian rights and duties, because these were human souls. So, the Anglican Church took an entirely different twist versus what the Americas did. To them [the Anglicans], they're Christianizing [the African slaves], giving them names, making sure that they had days of rest and days that they couldn't work. They could actually raise crops and things and such. So they were able to develop wealth and an economy far different than American slaves. But my father's side was a little bit different because they were not slaves. My father's family, they were free people of color.

02-00:37:25

Eardley-Pryor:

In Jamaica?

02-00:37:26

Mair:

In Jamaica. The story to be proven and searched out was that Arnold Mair's ancestor, Alexander Mair, the founder of Mair Hall, in about 1789, 1790, he was part of the British Scottish regiments that were part of the American Revolution that fought against the Americans. And so, not all the British troops went back to England [in] the United Kingdom or Great Britain. A number of them settled in the Caribbean, Central America, and South American. And so, if anybody's really curious in note, you'll notice a lot of Scottish-named towns and communities throughout the Caribbean, and Jamaica is no exception.

And so, my ancestor got a land patent. There were very few women in the Americas. There was already, from the Dutch and the Spanish that were early colonizers as well, there was a robust Mestizo or mixed community within the Caribbean. And so, the notion or the term "Creole" is the term that is often used. You always find, really funny, in some of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature, some Creoles really resenting the pejorative use of the term "Creole," because that's one way of saying somebody had some African ancestry. And a lot of folks of color—or, as they say, of brown skin or mixed skin, I would say the complexion of southern Italians or Greeks or Spaniards—who could not lay claim to being Spaniard. They would try to reach to their European antecedent rather than try and identify an African antecedent.

But I know that my ancestor, Alexander Mair, married in the eighteenth century a woman of color, because we have his will. And those documents pass when you have a family that is free. The collection of records are just like any white family. Since my ancestor on my paternal side was white, who ran a plantation—in fact, what's really an interesting parallel, my ancestor on my father's side was like Ben Hagood.

02-00:39:58

Eardley-Pryor:

So you had, from your mother's side, enslaved ancestors that rose to freedom. And on your father's side—

02-00:40:06

Mair: Was free ancestors that had slaves.

02-00:40:08

Eardley-Pryor: Wow. And you mentioned Mair Hall. Where is that?

02-00:40:12

Mair: That is south of Montego Bay in the highlands of Westmoreland. It's in the central part of the island, on the western part. It's like, your Kingston, Jamaica, it's on the southeastern part. Westmoreland and Montego Bay are on the western. But Mair Hall is down in the hills and the highlands.

02-00:40:39

Eardley-Pryor: You've got mountains on both sides of the families, even here in South Carolina, and Jamaica.

02-00:40:43

Mair: Right. And there was a military base there called Westmoreland Barracks. And so, Westmoreland Barracks was one of the places—because to quell slave revolts and slave rebellions, a lot of those British troops, once they were done with hostilities in the Americas, they were also then stationed and deployed in bases throughout the Caribbean to pacify those people that the British Empire was then exploiting for its wealth. So, it was through their guns and steel.

In fact, Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel* is the narrative on that through warfare capitalism, which basically the British Empire was. It was warfare capitalism. My ancestor was one of the warrior capitalists and instruments of that warfare capitalism in Jamaica. And Mair Hall, through his standing and status as a soldier, he was able to get a land patent and settle there.

And another clue as to his military status: though we have not found his military documents just yet, we did locate the documents of his brother Robert Mair. And Robert Mair actually served at what is called Ticonderoga, as well as in the forts in Canada. And he was actually wounded. So, we actually have the eighteenth century records of his brother Robert Mair.

02-00:42:04

Eardley-Pryor: So, your distant ancestor's brother—

02-00:42:06

Mair: Brother. We have actual documentation of where he was in the Americas and where he got wounded.

02-00:42:11

Eardley-Pryor: And served where you grew up [in New York].

02-00:42:12

Mair:

And served where I absolutely grew up, which is kind of an interesting piece. And also, another one of his brothers actually traveled during 1790s. There's something called "The Journals of John Mair." And so, Alexander and John. So we have this lengthy history. And how do we have this is because Alexander had papers like Ben Hagood, and those papers, actually through my father's side of the family, passed down. And so, we have these wills that list his brothers, his sisters, where they were living in Scotland.

But what's also in that will, which is powerful, is his children, his wife. And, these are very powerful documents because clearly they had legal documents recognizing—because people of color had to carry papers to differentiate themselves between free and slave, just in case some idiot challenged them. But usually back then, everybody knew who was who. But insofar as the legal paperwork and documents—because they did not have registries like you have today in the modern sense or like they did in England at the time—so wills and church records were powerful tools and instruments to determine whether somebody was of a family name or whether they were a bastard. That's a very, very big thing in the Caribbean. If you ever look at a lot of Colonial-era drama and plays, whether a child was recognized or not was a big thing.

02-00:43:38

Eardley-Pryor:

Like Alexander Hamilton's story.

02-00:43:39

Mair:

In fact, Alexander Hamilton would have been a Mair relative. In fact, Alexander's Creole heritage is exactly that. And so, Alexander Hamilton is kind of interesting, because I call myself the "Alexander Hamilton of the environmental justice movement."

02-00:43:56

Eardley-Pryor:

Why is that?

02-00:43:56

Mair:

I do that in two points, because Alexander Hamilton was not only a Federalist, but he believed in federalism—the power of a central government and civilian power amplified to spread the burden and growth and, as they say, the broader liberties of prosperity to all. Alexander Hamilton saw firsthand, through his childhood and through his upbringing, the inequalities of a stratified caste system based upon white privilege and how, if you were a mixed child, how you were treated as second class. So it's not an [accident] that he was the creature who he became.

And then, when necessity dictated, which often in his life it did, he forgot his Creole ancestry. So, one of the things that you will see [create] tensions within the Black community are those who are what they call "passing as white," where those people who are so fair-skinned, but they have African ancestry. And just by the whims of genetics, you can have a brother or sister that's very

dark and another brother or sister that would be very, very fair and look like a European. So, you can have that permutation within a family. And Alexander Hamilton was no exception.

But the genius of Alexander Hamilton was the pushing for a better, inclusive civil society and seeing that vision and the tools of when we're creating this great nation. We can recreate the world in a better way from the evils of the world as it existed at that point in time—as a dependency, based upon warfare capitalism, and using the Americas as an extractatory state predicated upon institutions of slavery.

02-00:45:44

Mair:

So Alexander Hamilton, I knew where he was coming from. In the play, where he's coming up, and getting his "shot," and how he's trying to do all these things, he clearly was a thorn in the side of those who just wanted to make themselves wealthier men—the George Washingtons, the Thomas Jeffersons—who had to deal with the contradictions of saying, "Yeah, you know, everybody should be equal. We're all coming from"—

In fact, there were two drafts of the Declaration of Independence, and you should look at the two drafts. The first draft is what everybody then believed, and that's why you had, at that point in time, free people of color as well as slaves joining the cause, the Sons of Liberty. In fact, if you ever talk to the spies—there's a whole series of novels of the spy networks that George Washington used during the Revolutionary War—but a critical piece of that spy network was all that was done in the backdrop of using these slaves in the slave community and the free people-of-color community as the channels by which the Sons of Liberty, who were whites seeking to break away, could pass their information.

Fraunces Tavern in Lower Manhattan was a major establishment used by a lot of the founders and fathers of this great nation. It was run and owned by a free person of color. So, it was a critical place and space.

02-00:47:04

Eardley-Pryor:

Well, take me—so, we've laid this—

02-00:47:06

Mair:

I'm going to your point. But, Arnold, you're asking about the Americas. It's really fascinating in Alexander Hamilton. But the point is Alexander Hamilton is as Creole as my ancestors. And his existence is exactly the existence of mine. In fact, I would say my ancestors had it better, and by having it better meant that they did not have to flee to America to still try to make their fortune. Alexander Hamilton, the reason why he left the Caribbean to come to America was because he was having a hard time.

My family, like Ben Hagood's family, were very comfortable in Mair Hall. In fact, they had the same diverse operation. There was a lumber mill. They had

their crops. They had actually what they call a pen. A pen is different from a plantation in that you had large heads of livestock. And so, meat was a very prized commodity that you could make better money. And yet, you still required slaves to do that. So, my ancestors had a large pen in Mair Hall. Not only did they supply lumber, tin, and metal. They were also wheelwrights. They made carriages, buckboards. They were like the General Motors of their era, more like a Studebaker factory.

02-00:48:20

Eardley-Pryor: So, Arnold Sr., your grandfather, emigrated to New York the same way Hamilton did. So what brought them?

02-00:48:29

Mair: Well, at that point in time, the economic hardships and the unequal relationships of international capitalism. Jamaica went from a frontier resource, as well as military outpost, to becoming a dependency within the colonial network. The unequal relationships within any colonial empire put all the peripheral nations at a strategic and significant disadvantage. They can provide their sons for war and extraction of the natural resources for wealth, but not all that opportunity went back. England always was at the top, and its dependencies at the bottom.

At the end of World War I, there was a major economic collapse. England was exhausted. Its wealth was exhausted. And its empire was taxed heavily to try to rebuild England.

02-00:49:21

Eardley-Pryor: And that was the push-factor that brought Arnold Mair to New York?

02-00:49:22

Mair: That push created a lack of economic opportunity for Arnold Sr. And a lot of those young men had to leave the island and to go elsewhere within the British Empire or English-speaking world to make their fortune. So, he had cousins. I have cousins that served in World Wars for the emperors but went to South Africa. And because they were fair-skinned, they passed as whites in South Africa. And they were parts of the pillars—again, this is on my paternal side—in that struggle.

So, again, interesting how that plays out. But what was fascinating is Campbell Dewar, which is Arnold's cousin. Not only was he fair-skinned, but because they were free, at that particular point in time of the twentieth century, he was a medical doctor. These men were able to become doctors, lawyers, professors. They had all the high-end skills that whites, almost exclusively whites, enjoyed in the Americas. They were often the professional whites.

So, while you had a very segregated America where these opportunities were denied Blacks and people of color, and the access to academic institutions

were denied Blacks, they were fully already open to people of color [within the British Empire]. And if you were descendants of property people of color, you had them open to you from the early nineteenth century.

02-00:50:45

Eardley-Pryor: Tell me what happened with your father. So, he grows up in Harlem in the midst of the Renaissance, but in a totally different cultural situation.

02-00:50:53

Mair: Well, two things. The economic hardship in Jamaica forced both my grandfather, who was a Mair, and my grandmother, who was a Clunie—in fact, her brother was a pharmacist, one of the first licensed pharmacists in the state of New York. So, these were people who were highly skilled. They left the island to make their fortune. They figured that with their economic and education background, they would be a success.

And what's really interesting amongst—and this is within a group of people-of-color tension—is that when they got here, they saw themselves separate and distinct from African-Americans. Because of the institution of racism, it created a caste system even amongst Black people. So there was the discrimination within people of color upon the hue of your skin, but also upon where you came from.

That's why it's very fascinating when you talk about the dimensions of racism and how it can really structure the way people think, even amongst people of color, because whites, they just hate them all. If you were Black—in fact, America amongst whites, when a lot of people of color are coming to the United States, the United States had what they called the “one drop” thesis. If you had one drop of African blood, you were Black.

And Virginia was so pernicious that they literally had to keep rolls of fair-skinned people. They'd literally track families because they knew that a lot of Blacks had been here since the founding of the country. But because of intermarriage with whites, they literally passed as whites. And so, Virginia tracked people. They actually tracked people. Other states, they didn't have that kind of tracking.

02-00:52:30

Mair: But, all of those ugly features of racism passed also into the oppressed communities who adopted them and felt that they also would adopt them as ways of stratifying and being more like whites. So, the more like white you were, these were things that advanced you. Some Blacks coming out of the Caribbean, my grandfather Arnold [Mair, Sr.], actually looked like you.

02-00:52:57

Eardley-Pryor: He looked like a white man?

02-00:53:00

Mair: In appearance, he was a European-looking man.

02-00:53:03

Eardley-Pryor: What did that mean for your father then, after coming to this new place, growing up in Harlem?

02-00:53:07

Mair:

It was really funny because when Arnold [Mair, Sr.] married Rhoda Clunie, who's my complexion, it caused a big stink within Arnold's family. And they called her the N-woman, "Arnold's little N-woman." It's really painful. It was a source of deep pain and part of the thing that led to the divorce of Arnold and Rhoda. So, you'll even hear it in Spanish. They say "negra." It's an affectionate term. So, "negra" is Black. And, within Jamaican families, to ascend to look like the British or ascend to look like the Scottish, the whiter you were was the closer that you would get.

A lot of people would hail their Scottish ancestry. I embrace it. I call myself an African Anglo-Celt, but I emphasize the African first. And I coined the term "AfAnCel," which is African Anglo-Celt. So I embrace that, which is really a radical American. I really have become an Alexander Hamilton in that regard. But within my father's side, that emigration to America, is how racism and oppression in the United States becomes a crucible, a new forge, a blast furnace through its heat and intensity, that enforces and forges a new identity.

So what would have been taboo in Jamaica, of him marrying a brown woman and folks would say, "What's your"—but to Jamaica it would be as if she was black as the ace of spades. But the fact that that was even a factor or notion or thought shows you how the ugliness of what was then called eugenics had actually penetrated the psyche and mind of global culture. Eugenics, again, linking back to Joseph LeConte, who was one of the fathers of the American Eugenicists movement. Now, eugenicists had been around long before, but Louis Agassiz, who Joe LeConte mentored under, he was one of the pioneers in eugenics. This is one of the aspects of naturalism which, while we talk about flora and fauna and other species, it was also applied to humanity.

And how that was internalized by people of color throughout the world in a form of internal oppression, and the distortions and the retardation of culture, and also the psychological trauma that we are acting on even to this day. You see that in the tokenism and how whites can play on it with how our current president, Donald Trump, takes a Ben Carson and plays Ben Carson off as the ideal type of Black, vis-à-vis other Blacks. And he will quickly contrast him to a Maxine Waters. He'll take on Oprah and her darkness and contrast that with an Omarosa, a subservient, cunning and conniving—and what's really insidious is that people start to play that on the race. But that's just parts of human behavior. And if you strip away their color, those types of things exist most widely. But when adding race to it, it becomes a very interesting and ugly and powerful dynamic. And that also affected our family.

02-00:56:14

Mair:

So my grandfather marrying my grandmother was considered, amongst Jamaicans, like an interracial marriage—even though our family was an interracial family. And I've never thought about it this way. I often take in my dialectic of dismantling racism in the United States in the environmental movement by going after the naturalists and LeConte. So, you're hearing me actually free-think and freeform in applying this analysis and analytic to my Jamaican ancestry, because I haven't done that intensely. Because my context and what's in my face right here is the racism here in America.

But it's that very racism, that international racism, that international eugenics movement, that also played out in my family and caused the migration of my ancestors, because the downturn led to further oppression in Jamaica and extraction. And then, my grandfather [Arnold Mair, Sr.] had to come to the United States to re-earn the fortune and rebuild the name. He went from being high up in Jamaica and knocked down to a working class. So here's these brilliant, educated Jamaicans coming in to America, these men who were seasoned war veterans from World War I. And they perceived their order as being better than African-Americans in Harlem.

02-00:57:43

Mair:

And what was really fascinating is that here's this vet from the Caribbean coming in with his thinking superior, but now he's clashing with African-Americans who had just proved themselves under a French uniform in Harlem, fighting for France and earning high honors. And so, he actually was not coming in superior, but he's coming in with peers. And the only thing that separated him was the hue of his skin and the fact that he served under the Crown, whereas the Americans are saying, "Yeah, our nation was ashamed of us. They disowned us. We served under the French. But we still bailed out England." So, you can see Harlem.

02-00:58:21

Eardley-Pryor:

Those are a lot of complex dynamics there.

02-00:58:22

Mair:

Yeah. Harlem is actually that true melting pot and that fusion. Like I said, it was a crucible that tore down a lot of class and caste distinction within groups, that allowed groups that, in Jamaica, would never have met or married. So, my grandfather met my grandmother Rhoda, who was also an Ellis Island immigrant, right there in Harlem. He actually was a friend of her brother. They were all in these hangout circles. Her brother's very fair-skinned, a pharmacist. But his sister is my complexion.

So, even within her own family my grandmother will tell you stories that, because she was brown—and she says she's Black. She goes, "And they hated me because I was Black." I go, "Grandma, you're not Black. Rhonda is Black." Rhonda is my baby sister. And so, you could point to somebody within the family that's darker and say, "Oh, she's Black. You're not." And

it's kind of funny how these cycles of oppression within groups, how these things are still subtly kept up.

But the trauma and scars are real. So that, coming to America, being a hero in World War I with the famed British West Indian Regiment, who then had to fight against racism on top of bailing and saving the Brits—in fact, without the British West Indian Regiment, and without the regiments from India, England would have definitely lost World War I. [England] would not be there. People don't realize the power of people of color in actually saving what was then the growing and burgeoning western world. They would have lost.

02-01:00:06

Mair:

And these men were thrown in from countries and places far-flung throughout the empire. They went from lush green backdrops to all of a sudden fighting in landscapes that were just overwhelming. But yet, they did. And my ancestor [Arnold Mair, Sr.], he fought, like I said, for Allenby in Palestine, that whole area. In France, his war wound was that he was gassed. He had lung damage, which we all thought was asthma. But it wasn't until getting his war records that I realized that he was gassed.

But he settled in Manhattan. He hit the grinding racism that was in America. And because he did not fare as well as his brothers and his cousins—who either passed through America and went to Canada, or passed through America and went to England—a lot of them went on to become very successful entrepreneurs. But because he didn't, he, in his mind, was a failure. Because he ended up just becoming a doorman and what they call a "Building Superintendent," which is the guy that basically keeps the building offices clean. He's like the porter.

02-01:01:23

Eardley-Pryor:

Did you ever meet Arnold Sr.?

02-01:01:25

Mair:

Oh, yeah. My grandfather was a very soft-spoken man. He loved his grandchildren. Very quiet. He just never talked about his past. He never talked. He would come. He would hug you. He was a very—he came to Peekskill [New York]. My father brought him up several times.

And it's kind of funny because when we'd go to Harlem, we had something called the Bad Air Fund. That was our pejorative twist on something called the Fresh Air Fund, which was an environmental health program where they took kids from New York City—white, Black, and what have you—and they sent them to places like Westchester, which is north of the City, or to New Jersey, places where the air quality was superior. That would deal with upper respiratory ailments for children who—at that time, the issue of asthma was really acute because every building burned coal, or burned garbage. If you

ever saw pictures of New York City before the Clean Air Act, it made the smog of Los Angeles look like a clear day. It was that thick. You could cut it.

So we called it the Bad Air Fund because, while most kids and youth from New York City were being shipped out of New York City so they could detoxify and clean their lungs, my father and mother had the shift change at General Motors. And their job schedule—there was nine of us—so they had to do something. And so that extended kinship network, we were sent to stay [in New York City] with my grandmother through the shift change and during the summers. So we would spend our summers and winters with Nana. It was a Jamaican summer and a Jamaican Christmas.

02-01:03:12

Eardley-Pryor: In Harlem?

02-01:03:13

Mair:

In Harlem. So I spent my time up on Harlem, on 139th Street, right across the street from the Delano Projects. Now, I mention the Delano Projects because at my time that I was growing up—in my formative years, right across the street from the Delano Projects—the Delano Projects was one of those major housing authority projects where the city's civil servants and middle class and Black vets got what they call "middle class housing" in Harlem. They were building these middle class high-rise projects. And that was like that [1970s television show *The Jefferson's* "moving on up" community].

And that's special because the girl who worked on the *Toxic Wastes and Race* report, Vernice Miller-Travis, with Charles Lee, she was one of the researchers working with Charles Lee to write that report. And she would become a significant pioneer in her own right in shaping and creating this environmental movement, the environmental justice movement. She is more than just the Betsy Ross. She did a lot more, because she was definitely like a Betsy-Ross-meets-Molly-Pitcher in the environmental movement. She was a fighter, this Vernice Miller-Travis. And she grew up across the street in the Delano Projects.

It wasn't until I was talking about my story and growing up and my years in Harlem, and she goes, "Well, where did you grow up, because I'm a Harlem girl. I know everywhere in Harlem." I go, "West 139th Street, right off of Lenox, right across the street from the Delano Projects." She goes, "Get out of here!" So, we had that "get out of here" moment that Vernice Miller-Travis grew up in the Delano Projects. And that's one of those weird little factoids and weirdnesses of this [environmental justice] movement, that I was having my Bad Aid Funds just as she was enjoying the bad air of Harlem in her youth. The world is a funny and strange place in that way.

But Harlem, before the Clean Air Act, like I said, was gritty, lots of soot, and real bad. We stayed inside a lot. But Grandmother took us all around, to The Bronx Zoo, the [New York] Botanical Gardens.

02-01:05:11

Eardley-Pryor: And this is the same place where your father grew up? I imagine she did that with him.

02-01:05:14

Mair: This is the same place. My grandmother [Rhoda Clunie Mair], a typical Jamaican woman. One of the jokes on Jamaicans is about how many jobs—they were always hustling and entrepreneurial. She was a Madam C.J. Walker girl. Madam C.J. Walker was a famed beautician and one of the first Black multimillionaire entrepreneurs, one of the first to have a major mansion, the Villa Lewaro. It was up in Westchester County, and I believe in Irvington, New York. It was one of the most significant holdings by an African-American. This woman was a millionaire.

And her industry was hair care products. Hair care products is another form of white racism present in culture because Black women liked to straighten their hair to look like or have their hair emulate white female hairstyles. And so, again, white being the center or the desired interpretation of what is beauty and culture. So then, the equivalent of a billion-dollar industry, but then multi-million-dollar industry, was to be had in straightening one's hair.

And that was part of the Harlem renaissance. If you ever look at the poets and the jazz musicians, Duke Ellington, these are men whose hair normally would be kinky and that. But with these hair care products, your hairs were wavy.

02-01:06:38

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, even Malcolm X when he was a young man—

02-01:06:39

Mair: Oh yes, what they called the “conk.” Cab Calloway *so* loved his locks. If you ever saw him dancing, his hair was so slick he'd be able to shake his head. And that was a big thing, because you would grow your hair long and you wanted to be able to shake it, because you wanted to look like that white male throwing their hair back. So it's a subtle thing that whites won't know, but it was within Black culture. It was a sign of hipness when you could slick it and flip it. This is a big thing.

So my grandmother, she had something called the Victory Shop in Harlem. And between her Victory Shop and her countless appointments as a housekeeper, she did it all. She had to raise her children because, basically, her and Arnold got a divorce. He was in between jobs often. And as a consequence, alcoholism set in, and he became an alcoholic. This was very common back then. Black men were underemployed. And between underemployment and the racism and the open hostility, Arnold was a very

strong curiosity. Because here's a man with a high-educated Jamaican accent whose ego as a veteran and a soldier, and whose sense of station in life, his deportment, was proper.

02-01:08:12

Eardley-Pryor: And that shattered him in New York?

02-01:08:13

Mair: And yet, you come to New York, you're just a boy. I think Malcolm X said it eloquently: "Your first name is Nigger, your middle name is Boy, and your last name is John." And in the United States, back then, what do you call a Black with a PhD? The famous response was "Nigger." So regardless of your station, no matter where you were—and this is one of the things when they talk about the old communities.

When some Blacks, older Blacks like my generation and older, talk about the Black community, they go, "The community has changed and different." Because, back then, Blacks of *all* educations and stripes were put into a ghetto. There was a diversity of education in these communities. The creativity, the artistry, and all these things we talk about in the [Harlem] Renaissance was because their crucible of racism forced—regardless of their background and their education. Everything was available. So a child could grow up on extreme poverty, but next door could be a poet, could be a medical doctor, or a lawyer downstairs, all within the same tenement building. So you had a whole diversity of experience that a child still could [find a] mentor, be inspired, say, "I want to be like Mr. Johnson, or my uncle over here."

But as racism began to be deconstructed in the United States, and as Blacks were able to move beyond the ghettos, you had that Black flight of the intelligentsia and middle class going to the suburbs and other places and becoming more mobile. And then those that were left behind in these old communities were really the poorer and less educated of the Black community. It's like any dying town. It's like when all the businesses and shops and things of value leave. What's left behind are those who cannot and do not have the mobility.

02-01:09:50

Mair: So, my father [Arnold Mair, Jr.] growing up in Harlem, it was Harlem at its heyday. It was the Harlem of Duke Ellington. It was the Harlem that, to this day—the Cotton Club—everybody came. Even the whites came up to Harlem. And the Savoy Ballroom, this is where people learned to dance. The jitterbug, all these things that you see everybody—what they called the swing dance or the swing era, they called it swing to whiten it. But it actually all came out of Harlem and the Black community. The richness there and the power of culture, these are things that was part of Arnold Jr.'s experience.

But Arnold Sr., he was lost in the world and between worlds. He lost his homeland, and he came to America, to build, where the streets in his mind were lined with gold and opportunity. And he became less than what he was in Jamaica. In fact, he did not do so well that he was even ashamed to go back to Jamaica, so he stayed in United States, and he hid. He hid.

02-01:11:10

Mair:

But I always remember him as a man with great pride and dignity. And the tensions between him and my father is really the standard father and son. I think the resentment of my father of his father was that his father did not become a big man. Here's a bright guy that just did not hit it big. But also, it's that fact that my father just did not put it in the frame and lens, [nor] had the tools to put it in the frame and the lens, of the bigger institutional racism. Now, he in his own right would come into his own as a labor rights organizer.

02-01:11:48

Eardley-Pryor:

Your father?

02-01:11:49

Mair:

My father, Arnold Jr. He, as a labor rights organizer, he worked at General Motors' plant in Tarrytown [New York]. He was an Army vet in World War II. And Arnold was very much an activist. He saw things in terms of class. Race, he felt that it was all part of a bigger class struggle. That's that Harlem Left-thinking. And he took that analysis another stage. And so, it still allowed him to come into a home where he had a lot of respect and reverence for his dad. But because his dad was just nothing more than a building superintendent, he did not look up to him.

But it was that troubled tension. That this society, through racism and the lack of opportunity despite somebody's education and background, made a man less than a man. And so, not only did Arnold Sr. lose his family, he lost a lot of his dignity and identity to the racism.

02-01:12:55

Eardley-Pryor:

Well, we're going to go to the Golden Grove Church here today. So, one hundred years in the wake of Veteran's Day, on Armistice here [November 11, 2018], we can pause here for a moment. We'll continue with the rest of the story.

02-01:13:09

Mair:

It was kind of funny, but Arnold Sr., I'm glad we're kind of doing this in the shadow of Armistice Day, because he was definitely one of the vets that served right up to the end, in the eleventh hour of the eleventh month of the eleventh day, so yes.

02-01:13:27

Eardley-Pryor:

All right. Thank you, Aaron.

Interview 3: November 13, 2018

03-00:00:01

Eardley-Pryor: Today is November 13, 2018. We're here for our third session of the oral history interview with Aaron Mair, as part of the Sierra Club Oral History Project. Today, Aaron, we are meeting in the Arbor Hill Development Corporation in your hometown, Albany, New York. We're on Clinton Avenue in downtown Albany, just a few blocks away from the ANSWERS incinerator.

Last time you and I spoke, at Miss Stella's house, in your cousin Stella's house, you shared some of the story of your father, Arnold Mair, Jr. and his father, Arnold Sr., and how they came to New York. Where I'd love to begin today is to hear a little bit about how Margaret Elizabeth McKenzie came from the South to New York, and how Arnold Jr. and Margaret Elizabeth met, then bring you into the world.

03-00:00:50

Mair:

Well, the push and pull we talked about, my mother having to get her high school and vocational training in North Carolina. And that's where she got her nurse's aide certificate. And with that, again, limited opportunities in the South, and part of the various waves of African-American migration out of the South to the North and the West Coast—places where there would be better opportunity [against] the institutional racism and segregation denied them by fully closed doors of opportunity. So their choice, if they wanted to go further and do more than just sharecropping, the push for her—for economic security and advancement—was to go north.

And this is a well-worn path by countless cousins, aunts, and uncles who had moved north. And the tradeoff, unfortunately and sadly, is their culture and heritage of actually being on the land and being farmers, to that of an urban lifestyle, where you're relying upon a wage for your income but also providing and buying your food. You go from growing your food to now consuming it and getting it at a supermarket.

And back then, it was also viewed as the modern thing. During the [WWII] war years, you had a lot of the sacrifice and the burdens of sacrifice just because of the war. We're rationing and everything else. But during those years, she, like many people—you're looking at the limited resources, but again, her at that point in time—was living with family.

03-00:02:34

Eardley-Pryor: Let me frame what point in time we're talking about. When was she born, and when did she move north?

03-00:02:39

Mair:

You're going to hit me with—

03-00:02:40

Eardley-Pryor: Around.

03-00:02:42

Mair: Yes, my mother was born, I would say, 1925-ish.

03-00:02:47

Eardley-Pryor: Okay. Mid-twenties?

03-00:02:48

Mair: The mid-twenties. And, she moved north right around the mid-to-late forties.

03-00:02:59

Eardley-Pryor: Okay, so right after the war?

03-00:03:00

Mair: Yes, so right after the war she's gone north.

03-00:03:07

Eardley-Pryor: Part of that Great Migration story?

03-00:03:08

Mair: Part of that Great Migration. There actually were several. There was the Great Migration shortly right after Reconstruction, where you had the poll taxes and all those things that were forcing people off their lands. That caused a massive migration.

03-00:03:21

Eardley-Pryor: Yes, push factors.

03-00:03:23

Mair: There was the post-World War I Great Migration where you had, again, similar factors of racism. In fact, Billie Holiday's song "Strange Fruit," in which the lynchings of 1919—

03-00:03:37

Eardley-Pryor: The Red Summer.

03-00:03:38

Mair: The Red Summer of 1919. These were huge push factors. And it's kind of interesting because at that time, the end of World War I, you had skilled Blacks coming in from their service in Europe and coming back and trying to advance themselves and clashing with the culture. But interestingly, on my father's side, my grandfather and them, coming over from Jamaica because of the economic downturn in Jamaica. So there was a massive out-migration to New York from Jamaica during the twenties and thirties. And my mother's generation, her two-step migration because of segregation in schools and lack of opportunity, and this was pre-Brown vs. The Board of Education whereby South Carolina did not have to provide them with secondary [schooling] and [no] access also to vocational or college.

03-00:04:24

Eardley-Pryor: How was it then that your mom was able to get her nursing degree before she moved up to New York?

03-00:04:28

Mair: Well, the thing is that, as related by countless cousins and others, you had to rely on the extended family network. My mother's sister, Leola Ballenger, she had an apartment because she had—again, herself through multiple jobs and the family network. It's just right over the border [to North Carolina], so she can easily go into South Carolina and back and forth with food and groceries and things that she needed. But, the point in the matter is she had the means by which she could benefit in North Carolina a little bit better.

03-00:05:09

Eardley-Pryor: She crossed the border to go to school up there?

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Mair: Yes. So, she had to cross the border, and she stayed with an aunt.

03-00:05:14

Eardley-Pryor: Those are serious mountains to cross, too.

03-00:05:16

Mair: Those are very serious mountains.

03-00:05:18

Eardley-Pryor: Blue Ridge Mountains are not small.

03-00:05:18

Mair: The Blue Ridge Mountains, aside from the beauty—and if you're up high in them, the air quality is second to none—they are real barriers. They definitely separate North Carolina and South Carolina and the Tennessee area in that corner.

03-00:05:37

Eardley-Pryor: I tell you what, just before I came up here [to New York] yesterday, I visited Caesars Head [in South Carolina], where you had said Benjamin Hagood had been celebrated for creating ecotourism in South Carolina. And that's a heck of a drive up there. It was freezing cold. It was thirty-two degrees at the top, pouring rain.

03-00:05:54

Mair: Yep. In the summer, it is cooler, so you can actually get the variation in temperatures at the top vis-à-vis the bottom. So you can understand the benefit of them driving the cattle to the top during the summer months from the fields, because that's where they can get water and graze, but also the exercise, moving them.

And what's amazing when you hear the tale of Ben Hagood and his visionary development of that ecotourism industry, as I said, the ghosts and the shadows

in the back, those slaves of the old Caesars Head Inn, those were all my family. And what's amazing is, if you look at the Caesars Head Inn, you look at the clapboard housing and what it took to build that building, that structure, because it was from the wood from his mill. And that gives you an idea of the skill set that my ancestors had, because it was all built by slaves. Built by slaves, run by slaves.

03-00:06:52

Eardley-Pryor: There was zero reference to that point in their reading room and the photographs that commemorate the [Caesars Head] Inn. It's total whitewash.

03-00:06:59

Mair: Well, it's like American history. You read about the founding fathers, but you don't read about Crispus Attucks, who was the first to take a bullet for freedom. Because it was inconvenient. If you're going to reduce a people to three-fifths of a human being, you have to erase their history, because if you start to elevate that—even though it was one of the most successful pieces of propaganda ever used, the broad side of the Boston Massacre. But what it did not drill down to—in fact, if you look at the broad side, everybody that was dead on the ground was painted as white.

And so, you had to have the recounts, the recounts that you actually learn in history. But those details, those salient [details], are deliberately pushed aside. And the same thing with our family creating the culture, custom and heritage of ecotourism in South Carolina, that it was on the back of slaves. And it was those slaves who provided that world-class and first-class experience. And, as you sampled some of my family's cooking, these traditions don't die.

03-00:08:02

Eardley-Pryor: No, [they don't.] That was delicious and delightful!

03-00:08:03

Mair: They're good. But, you could imagine what it was like having a crab cake cooked up by the family or whipped up for them up there on top of the mountain.

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Eardley-Pryor: So, those were the generations [earlier]. Your mother is also climbing up over these mountains to get her education in North Carolina.

03-00:08:20

Mair: Exactly. It's those very same mountains. You didn't stop to drive cattle, but actually it was sort of like what I call the chronic Underground Railroad situation. You had to have the Underground Railroad just to get to education. So while you didn't have your slave masters pursuing you, you had the legislation of segregation pursuing you. It was the legislation of segregation, of separate and unequal policies and laws that forced her to go to Hendersonville [North Carolina] to get her education.

03-00:08:52

Eardley-Pryor: To get out of the dark shadow of Jim Crow.

03-00:08:52

Mair: And so, Hendersonville and Rutherfordton are two key depots in our family's migration out of the South, and for her to get that education. It was her and her sister. It was really fascinating because there was a lot of emphasis put on the women getting the education, because the men still were very valuable and necessary for the laborious task on the farm. My great-grandfather, William Berry McKenzie, he sharecropped the farm, his farm and holdings that he got from his father Zion McKenzie. He sharecropped his holdings to his sons. And so, his sons and their families became like indentured servants on the land. So there was, like, that pattern.

03-00:09:35

Eardley-Pryor: Within the family?

03-00:09:36

Mair: Within the family. It was communal, but if you were the next generation working on that farm, you still were second class. And so, my mother had aunts who were about her age. William Berry McKenzie—John Paul McKenzie's father—still had younger daughters, and they were about the age of my mother and my aunt Fanny, which is my mother's next-oldest sister. Actually, she's the third-oldest. The oldest sister, Esther McKenzie, died as a child. There's a pattern of naming in our family in which we carry the names of those we love. And Esther was a baby that my mother loved and tickled, and her death really struck my mother. And it struck her so that her first and oldest daughter—

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Eardley-Pryor: Your mother's [daughter]?

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Mair: My mother, Margaret's daughter, was [also named] Esther. There's nine of us. And Esther Virginia Patterson was my mother's first child. Esther Virginia, she died very, very young, in her thirties, of alcoholism. And we'll get to that drug culture and how that hit the community later. But the point of the matter is she carried that name. And Esther and I were very close. When my wife Maria Pacheco had [our first daughter] Marjana—Marjana, her middle name is Esther. So the name Esther goes back three generations just on that line because of my mother's love and memory of her infant baby sister that just never grew to adulthood.

03-00:11:21

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. So, tell me—so we have your mother going over the mountains to enrich her education, and then climbing even further up the mountains up to New York to find work.

03-00:11:32

Mair:

And she was successful because the biggest employer of African-Americans—because a lot of the policies of discrimination were often in the private sector—mostly at your state and county levels because, again, a good job, a good civil service job, was a desired thing. And urban centers in the Northeast, if they were not unionized at a factory, they had their blue-to-white-collar work at a government post or a government job. So the government has always been one of those big employers, that if you can get in, it's a big deal. So my mother was able to get a job at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Montrose, New York.

03-00:12:14

Eardley-Pryor:

Was Leola Ballenger living in New York at the time? Did they come together?

03-00:12:17

Mair:

Well, Leola, my aunt Leola, as the girls got older by that time, she did move up to Queens, and so she was actually up. But also, there was [my mother's] sister Annie Lee, Annie Lee McKenzie. And she was great friends and hung out with a guy called Peg Leg Bates.

And so, when you talk about the Catskill area of New York—again a little bit further north up the Hudson, what they called the Borscht Belt, and where a lot of the Jewish camps were and summer camps were, you had entertainment. But also you had these Black areas amongst these camps.

And Peg Leg Bates, he had a major entertainment or recreational facility. And he was famous because he was a one-legged tap-dancing phenom. And he was close friends with Cab Calloway, close friends with everybody in the Harlem Renaissance. Everybody knew Peg Leg Bates. And going to see Peg Leg Bates, amongst the African-American community throughout the Northeast and going down to the South, was like going to Disney World.

03-00:13:25

Eardley-Pryor:

Your mother's sister knew him?

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Mair:

Yes. Her aunt, Leola Ballenger, whose house my mother stayed at—this is, again, the women settled as a lot of these women got out and moved on. So, because the family's so large, I'm not going to have where all my aunts were. But what they did do was, between South Carolina and Boston, a lot of the sisters and cousins settled, and also in Chicago. So you had family in that V-shaped direction out of the South, those big—

03-00:13:59

Eardley-Pryor:

And it was mostly the women that were putting down these foundations?

03-00:14:01

Mair:

It was mostly the women. And again, because women were not viewed as threatening as males. Also because women, not only could they have the regular jobs, but on top of that they can get jobs as hairdressers or seamstresses or the good old-fashioned—they would become the house nanny or maid. As white women were stepping into—as the Rosie the Riveter class was stepping into their jobs, their houses were a mess. So it was very common for the Rosie the Riveter class to hire Black women to do domestic work for them, to be there for the kids. So again, that same pattern of slavery, where people of color are used as labor-saving devices so that whites or that class or caste can go out and earn more income and move on. So they would go up, but it was that niche created that allowed these women to step in.

03-00:15:18

Mair:

And again, it was the fact that your pay was low. It's kind of interesting when I hear the women's movement that talks about the women's pay-rate relative to men. What they don't talk about is the women-of-color pay-rate relative to white women. It's automatically assumed when they make that broader umbrella that it's all women. No, it isn't. Even amongst white women, that's been a historic truth since the days of Rosie the Riveter.

Because my mother and them had to work not only their nursing job, the cleaning job, and my mother also had a laundry job at the Light Steam Laundry in Peekskill, New York, which was one of her many jobs. And so, it's kind of funny because it's always denoted that people from the Caribbean worked four or five jobs. But that was true of African-Americans throughout the thirties, forties, and fifties living in the Northeast. When you had a large number of family, you had to.

And you did not have nannies who—basically the older children, the older siblings had that latchkey phenomenon where they were taking care of their younger siblings. And this was nothing new. Because that goes all the way back to slavery where the older kids, while they could not do heavy field work, but they can get the buckets and fetch the waters while Dad, brothers, and uncles—the older ones out there doing the labor—they did not have to take a break from their work to go and get water or do a water break. And that's what you had, the young kids doing running work. So that phenomenon of just having those large numbers, they provided a lot of things.

03-00:16:37

Mair:

My mother when she came to the Northeast, she actually had a gentleman that she met. He was actually out of, I believe, North Carolina. And his name was Fred Albert Patterson. My mother met Fred Albert Patterson first, and they had three children first. And that was Esther Virginia, and the second child was Fred Albert Jr. and the third child was Derek Alan Patterson. And they were born right there in the sequence of '49, '50 and I believe '51 or just that close, about.

And so my mother had her jobs, plus these small kids, and a lot of that fell to her. And that, three small children back to back, plus she had to have her jobs, and plus she was also sending money down South Carolina to her mother, Rosa Mae Ballenger and her six younger siblings that were still down—actually, seven younger siblings that were still down in South Carolina. So when Margaret, Fanny, and Roy went off [north], that was less of the able-bodied hands to help out on the sharecropping work on the farm. That actually fell to my mother's younger siblings. And they did not produce as much. They did not earn as much. So, you just had that responsibility of sending money back to help your mom and your siblings, but also raising your own children. And that produced a number of strains. You talk about how economics are the biggest cause of divorce to this day, but imagine back then when you had very, very limited means and the economics were still acute.

And domestic violence and abuse of women was part of the cultural phenomenon in America. Everybody laughs romantically today at loudmouth Fred Flintstone, the cartoon, or The Honeymooners [television show] from the fifties. And the big punch line, sadly, was a domestic violence punch line: “Bang, zoom, the moon, Alice.” And the reality is, that that kind of violence was real. And so, my mother was a victim of that, and that led to her quick divorce from Fred, which was kind of interesting because she had a sense enough of her own economic worth and what she was already contributing. It's a big deal to get a divorce. But she was not going to be, “I've got to be home to fix you a dinner, and take care of these kids, plus earn this income.”

03-00:19:29

Mair:

And [she'd say] “I'm earning as much, if not as much more, than you.” And that was also true on my father's side. My grandmother, Rhoda Mair, she was earning more than my grandfather Arnold Mair [Sr.]. It was a very interesting phenomenon of Black males out there earning less than Black females because of the racism that limited their opportunities, because they could not go out to become domestics. Some could, but you're not going to trust some Black guy coming in your house. But you can trust a Black woman coming into your house.

So, that played out. I'm not surprised that the issue of divorce was common, or separation was common—or in this case, common-law families just breaking up. I assure you, that was a very huge phenomenon. And these were the harsh realities of going from an agricultural life, where a family, an extended family, was an asset to live on the land and run a farm. But when it came to northeast wage-living and a wage-dependent household, these became very, very huge stressors.

03-00:20:42

Eardley-Pryor:

So, she separated from Fred, took the kids, and where did she go next?

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Mair: She stayed in Peekskill [New York]. They had an apartment down on Water Street in Peekskill, and that's where she settled. But she still had the drudgery of her work and everything else. And so, you can imagine she ran into Arnold Mair, [Jr.,] who was up at the Veterans Administration Hospital.

03-00:21:03

Eardley-Pryor: Where she was working?

03-00:21:04

Mair: He was not working there, but he was one of—

03-00:21:06

Eardley-Pryor: No, [but] she was working there?

03-00:21:07

Mair: She was working there, but she was a nurse, and he was a crazy vet patient.

03-00:21:13

Eardley-Pryor: What do you mean when you say “a crazy vet patient”?

03-00:21:14

Mair: He's like the stereotypical veteran, World War II vet—the idea of the female nurse kissing the GI or the Navy man, that moment like the end of the World War II, where they've got the guy kissing the nurse in the middle of Times Square? It's corny. It's hokey. But, I can say that it was just not a white thing. It's Black as well. Many families were made between nurses and GIs. And nurses caring for GIs was not unusual. Veterans Administration was where you go to get your health care, where you got your checkup, where you didn't have to pay a lot of money out of pocket for private care. Because remember, back then, you did not have the clinic situation that you do today.

For veterans, one of the biggest benefits of being a GI was the benefits. You had your GI Bill, and you had health care. And so, if you're a vet, had to get screening—my dad ended up getting a job. He had a choice to go out to either the steel plants out in Buffalo, New York, or General Motors, or Ford plant over in Rahway, New Jersey. And for some reason he did not want to go to the Ford plant. And he definitely didn't want to go to Buffalo. And the big reason why was because he wanted to be near his mother [Rhoda, in Harlem].

And so, he figured that with his GI Bill and whatnot, he could probably get a house, a GI Bill house, down near in Queens or Long Island or nearby, and he can live the American dream and get a job, whatnot, there. And so, the job that was nearby, but a commute, was at General Motors Corporation, which was right there in Tarrytown, which is just north of Yonkers. And Yonkers, at that point in time, was really considered the country. So, even though geographically Yonkers abuts right up onto—

03-00:23:11

Eardley-Pryor: Right above The Bronx, yeah?

03-00:23:12

Mair:

—Bronx, but ever since the days of *Hello, Dolly*, go to the country, go to Yonkers. You had Rye Playland that was over there in Rye, up on the Long Island Sound. But it was just right outside of—if you go up along the sound, along the coast, you hit all the beefiest places. But you can understand why they saw it as the country.

It was the workingman's paradise between Orchard Beach in The Bronx, going on up to Rye Playland. That was where a lot of working-class people had access to recreational amenities that allowed them to get access to a beach. They did not have the cars to get to Jones Beach, but they can definitely take the trains and get up to Orchard Beach, or just for a smaller ride, if they carpoled, but not a long distance, not heavy traffic. It was cheaper to go up to Playland or to Orchard Beach, primarily because of tolls and distance. It's just a shorter distance. It's right there. And you've still got recreation.

But the point being is that guys like my dad, he saw all this opportunity, this potential. But unfortunately, because of redlining—this is another barrier that his generation—after his father ran into the role of racism, that really denied him an opportunity at a decent job. Son sees opportunity in the military, goes into the military, gets pay, still deals with the racism—but still has the aspirational hope because there's something called this GI Bill. And he was a big-time “I Like Ike” fan and everything else because Eisenhower—

03-00:24:47

Eardley-Pryor:

Well, take me back to World War II. What was your father's service experience?

03-00:24:51

Mair:

My dad was part of that wave, that last wave into Germany, right up through the Berlin Airlift. Basically, Dad was a big, burly transportation and transport guy, so he was running the trucks and what have you. As World War II was winding down, his units were part of those getting the coal, the oil, and all that stuff to the occupied sections of Germany. And right before, the hostilities hit and they had to do the airlift. And then his trucks were up there in Berlin, and he was up there in Berlin. He was then running supplies after the planes would drop the stuff. And his units, they were part of transport units, trucking stuff around.

So he was right up, from the end, the close of the war, right up through the Berlin Airlift. That's what his time was. And he was a real cool guy. He was a typical Harlem hustler. He was a fast talker. He was a hep cat. He loved his music. He always talked about his crushed velvet suit and what have you, and how his guys would hang out at the Savoy Ballroom [during] the Renaissance in Harlem. [...] But these were big places where he as a young man, teenager, right all the way up, this was the hangout for him.

So his big thing was getting himself a car, getting himself a place, and then taking care of his mother. He really wanted to take care of her because she was working hard. She was divorced, but she still had her shops and whatnot.

03-00:26:33

Eardley-Pryor: Rhoda was still living in Harlem?

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Mair: Yes. Rhoda lived in Harlem.

03-00:26:36

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, because you went there as a child, you said.

03-00:26:37

Mair: Yeah, I went there. We called it the Bad Air Fund when I was a kid. But Rhoda lived in Harlem right up until I went to college in 1979. Then she got a nice apartment up over in the Edenwald Public Housing Authority Projects. And the Edenwald is really kind of funny, because back in the day, when they built the housing authorities, they would actually also segregate the whites and Blacks. And so, Edenwald at that time still had a lot of whites in it. So, to her, going over to a housing authority project with white folks, to her, was like The Jeffersons of "moving on up." But it's really kind of funny because between that in 1979, by 1985 or whatever, the place was all Black. So total white flight. But still, that's where Nana moved to.

But Dad wanted to do something. Dad literally wanted one of those Queens townhomes that was very common amongst folks, or one of the co-ops. But unfortunately, racial covenants by people like Fred Trump [US President Donald Trump's father], who made their fortune not on serving and not on creating new housing, but actually their ability to get a federal government contract that guaranteed housing to veterans. And Fred Trump and them could pick and choose. The Levitts, they could pick and choose what veterans got housing and what veterans didn't. Guys like my dad could not get GI Bill housing in New York City. So he could not do what he wanted. And that actually was a blessing, because had he did that, he probably would have never met my mother.

So, in other ways, it's one way in which the racism of its day, and the redlining of its day, created a push factor that he got his job at General Motors. He was not going to get his GI Bill home, so he had to find somewhere to live. And part of getting a job at General Motors, you had to get your physical and your screening and all that. So, you had to go up to Montrose and get your physical and all that other stuff and all the screening and stuff, making sure you're all right.

03-00:28:44

Eardley-Pryor: And that's how he met your mom? When was that? When did they meet?

03-00:28:48

Mair: That's a good question. I do know that they—I want to say it's probably around 1954 or '55-ish.

03-00:29:05

Eardley-Pryor: Mid-fifties?

03-00:29:07

Mair: Mid-fifties.

03-00:29:09

Eardley-Pryor: And then, so they decide to get together, and your mom has three kids.

03-00:29:14

Mair: She has three kids, which is really unusual. It was really unusual. And I will give you a picture of my mom. If you saw my mom, Dad said that the woman could stop the A train, she was that beautiful. She was tall. She was six feet tall, and she was a stunner. I got a picture of her with her aunts, because when she was down on the farm where she grew up, she was the one sharecropping the field. But the aunts were like Cinderella, the sisters who were being prepped, while that young dirty one swept. So, my mother and her siblings were like little Cinderella or the mice, but it's really funny because they ended up developing almost this sister relationship. But she was meeting and hanging out with this cool guy from Harlem who was just taking her around to all the cool places and spaces. And, so I got a picture of my mom which I will share for this archive because she, God rest her soul, was one stunning, beautiful woman. And you're sitting here saying, "My God, after three children?" She really took care of herself.

03-00:30:28

Eardley-Pryor: So your father welcomed these three kids when they decided to move in together?

03-00:30:30

Mair: He took care of them. He raised them as his own. And, what was really funny, because as he fell in love with her, and a lot of things, like I said, he really took to my older brother. He really loved my older brother Dickie.

03-00:30:47

Eardley-Pryor: That's Derek?

03-00:30:48

Mair: No, that's Fred.

03-00:30:50

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, Fred is Dickie?

03-00:30:50

Mair: They called them Ricky and Dickie. Dickie was the oldest, and that's Fred [Jr.]. Dickie was the oldest. And Ricky was the second oldest, which is Derek. So, Ricky and Dickie, you say Ricky and Dickie Patterson in Peekskill,

everybody knows Ricky and Dickie. Or they call them The Pattersons, because Dickie was a little tough guy.

My dad was a big-neck. He looked like Mr. Clean. My dad looked like Mr. Clean, and he had the big broad shoulders. My dad was a brawler. He was one of those guys. And they called him Cool Arnie or Silky. That was another one of his nicknames. I love that fact. It's kind of funny because you'll hear my cousins or others do "Silkyisms," because he just had a way with what I'd call hot language. Even though he was an Army man, my God, he cussed like a sailor. I got it honestly, but at least my [military] branch lined up with my tongue. But my father, he could spin it. That fire that came out of Dad's mouth. It was all expletive-laden.

03-00:32:21

Mair:

But he was really a decent, caring, and loving father. And he loved hard, but he also had that Jamaican side, that stern side. You knew when to come in and when to go. But he loved them fiercely. And my childhood memory is he definitely had his favorite. His favorite was not his biological first-born son, but was Fred [i.e., Dickie]. And Dickie and my father had a very, very close bond. It was kind of interesting because I remember sometimes when their father would come by, and they would call "Daddy" and whatnot, and I could see my father grimace. He just hated the fact that they called him that because he felt that he was raising them, and he was being the man and that Fred [Sr.] lost the right to be called that.

There was one time, I think, Fred [Sr.] was kind of coarse with Dickie. And my father, he's about six-one. He had big, burly, powerful—I have, as they say, an alto voice compared to my daddy.

03-00:33:22

Eardley-Pryor:

Wow, that's saying something.

03-00:33:23

Mair:

My dad's voice could rock the walls and vibrate buildings to the ground. And, he would boom to Fred [Sr.], he says, "Don't talk to him like that again." And he had that ice-man look. I've never seen a Black man scared pale like that, but Fred got to a shade that looked almost like my father's father. My father's father, Arnold George Sr., was a white man. He could literally pass for white. And I watched all color rush out of Fred [Sr.] just because of Arnold's projection. Big Arnie. Silky. When he just dropped it on you, he just arrested him right there. And it's kind of funny. It was mutual, but he had a great relationship [with Elizabeth McKenzie's first kids].

But in short, so my dad meets my mom. He woos her, sweeps her off her feet with his New York City ways. They go to all the big clubs. Like I said, he was a hep cat. He was a hipster. And he was one of those guys that was part of that Harlem lore. And so, after a while, once he got the car, and with all of us

coming along—my brother Emerson was his first-born, Emerson Lee Mair, which really made him proud. Emerson was born in 1959.

November of the following year, 1960, my name, Aaron, came along. He'd swear to God that he named me Aaron David Mair, but that actually was a baptismal name. It was not my—pull up my birth record. Out of all the nine children, I'm the middle child with no middle name. But Daddy swore to the day he died that my name was Aaron David Mair. But I said no. In fact, we had this whole go-around with the name because I wanted to be called Arnold.

03-00:35:23

Eardley-Pryor: Arnold Jr., yeah, or III, Arnold III.

03-00:35:26

Mair: And he hated his name, and he and I had a bone to pick about that. I said, "But I would have been Arnold George Mair III." I said, "That would have been so cool." And he goes, "Oh, man." He goes, "No, no, no. You're Aaron." And the reason why Aaron stuck with him was very powerful. And you've got to blame Cecil B. DeMille [director of *The Ten Commandments* film, 1956].

03-00:35:47

Eardley-Pryor: Brother of Moses?

03-00:35:48

Mair: The brother of Moses, that Moses epic, because Dad was one of the deep, deep Episcopal boys. He was very religious. He went to St. Mark's Church on 138th Street. And when we were down there, we were always at St. Mark's Church on 138th Street, the whole summer. We were transplants. And, so those biblical epics, you would swear that Dad was actually having them. He was having an experience every time they did shows like that. *King of Kings*—

03-00:36:29

Eardley-Pryor: Probably *Ben-Hur*, that whole epic.

03-00:36:31

Mair: It's kind of interesting because the Exodus story, as they say, in his favorite show, is ultimately one that I use as the point—because there's that visual image of going out and fleeing slavery. And I says, "Man, that's more Mom's story." And from that standpoint, I really own the name Aaron. I can understand Aaron's role as a priest. And, you go into the biblical story, and you see that was a very significant role in service to one's people. So, from that standpoint, I could respect the name.

Then, shortly a year after me, came Veronica.

03-00:37:15

Eardley-Pryor: Every year your mom was having a—your mom and father—

03-00:37:17

Mair: Yeah, Arnold couldn't leave her alone. She's a beautiful woman, and Arnold couldn't leave it alone. And so, she was spent—

03-00:37:29

Eardley-Pryor: That's six kids all in that house.

03-00:37:30

Mair: Yeah. It was upsetting her because it was affecting income. That was the other piece of it. But Dad, he'd make ends—they'd do. And like I said, the thing that helped make ends meet—because your income, a lot of it is feeding your family. And in our household, we had my grandfather, and my uncle Richard, and my uncle Benny, or my uncle Roy would come in, or what have you. But you would always have four extra adults in the household. And those four extra adults were mainly my southern family. And what that really meant was that these were guys that, come the days when they had to go fishing or hunting, they went out and they fished. You just never thought about, as a kid, me as a kid growing up, how much dependent you were on a supermarket. It was, "Are y'all going fishing?" And going weekend fishing was a big thing.

You go right on down to the Hudson River, and you drop your line in. And if you go over to Flat Rock, which is over by the Annsville Creek, where its outflow is, you grab yourself some big bullhead cats [catfish]. You get two or three of those, and those filleted up would definitely do. And I say bullhead cats. As big as I am, those things were massive. The eels, they would cut them up. And then there's some days they would just hit the lotto of porgies, bluegills, and all the other assorted—they were more the pan fish, but you got yourself a big variety. The only fish I really hated was carp. It literally just tasted bland, and it was bony. But you could land a carp that'd be, like, three feet long and looked like about twenty-five pounds. When you see a three-foot-long carp, then you've seen something. And you could pull out some monster carp out of the Hudson River.

03-00:39:35

Eardley-Pryor: And this was just right out of the Hudson?

03-00:39:36

Mair: Right out of the Hudson River, right out of the Hudson River. Peekskill at that time, I did not know as a kid growing up—it's not until later as an adult and an environmentalist you learn what's going into the water. But back then, growing up, it was just a water body. And a water body, people with fishing poles, this was sportsmen, anglers, that culture—again, my mother's southern culture, custom, and heritage. This was actually a cultural dependency on the Hudson. We were subsistence fishermen, plain and simple. Our family relied on the protein coming from the Hudson River as a major source of food for our family, our very large family.

And the Hudson had some seasons called shad, herring, and striper. These were ocean shad, ocean herring, and ocean striper bass that would go out into the ocean. But when they come back, they come back to spawn. So they were very huge. They were big. And you could go in and just snag them all day.

Or in the fresh water that we were on, you had the Annsville outflow, and you had McGregory Brook outflow. And the McGregory Brook outflow flowed through what we now know as a Superfund site. But back then, it was the old Gypsum Sandpaper Company that they would call Black Sand Beach. And that's where I learned to swim, on Black Sand Beach.

I grew up and watched the Frankie Avalon [movie], *Beach Blanket Bingo*, with my brothers. And we would steal these two-by-sixes from Creed Brother Lumberyard. And we would go out and paddle into the Hudson. I did not know how to swim, and I was out there on this two-by-six, five years old, four years old. And I'm paddling out, and I'm going out, and the current would be drifting you down, and you'd just have to paddle back. And it never thought to freak me out that I was in danger.

03-00:41:26

Eardley-Pryor: Because you were with your family?

03-00:41:28

Mair: You were just, you could see your family, and everybody was there. But you also had this piece of wood that kept you up. And so, it would go out there, but eventually I learned to swim. But I'm thinking about how easily I could have drowned. Now I freak out when I think about the things.

03-00:41:45

Eardley-Pryor: What was in the water even?

03-00:41:47

Mair: Well, that was the other thing. Because it was nothing to be paddling, and all of a sudden the carcass of a dog or something goes floating by, or some bloated dead fish. Because immediately south of us, immediately right there on Charles Point in Peekskill, was the Indian Point Nuclear Reactor. And the Indian Point Nuclear Reactor, every now and then, would heat up the water so much that it would actually cook fish. And they would die, and they would boil, and they would get bloated, and they washed up on the shore.

And the thing you've got to know about the Hudson River, it's an estuary. The Native Americans called it "The River that Flows Both Ways." Don't ask me the native word, but there is a word for the Hudson River because it flows both north and south.

03-00:42:30

Eardley-Pryor: Depending on the tide?

03-00:42:31

Mair:

Depending upon the tide. It's a tidal estuary going all the way up to the Detroit River Dam. So when you're down in the Hudson Highlands, you're really at one of the fresh points where it's not unusual for any major seagoing creature to get in as far as Kingston, New York. So you see and hear about a lot of very, very interesting things.

The Hudson Highlands at that point, when I was growing up, you had a Liberty fleet of mothballed ships called the Ghost Fleet. So when you got down on the Hudson River, you could look over to the Ghost Fleet. And you had Annsville outflow. You had McGregory outflow. And then just south of Charles Point, you had the Indian Point Nuclear Reactor.

So, what would happen is, when they really had whatever going on at the Indian Point, it kills a bunch of fish, and it kills a bunch of fish at the time that the tide is flowing north. All those dead fish flow north. And then, as they come back down as the tide flows out, they then start drifting in. And Peekskill is on a little bit of a cove. So all those fish would actually, the dead fish would have a dead fish pool that would be circulating, which was kind of cool because it's like free chum. If you were smart, you'd be out there casting toward that chum because other fish would be eating the other dead fish.

03-00:43:52

Mair:

You had the Annsville outflow, which was the Peekskill—about a mile or so up the Annsville Creek was the Peekskill Sewage Treatment Plant. And it would discharge raw sewage into Annsville. And that would flow right there into the Hudson at the outflow. And that's where I found out—it wasn't until I was a teenager and my uncle broke it down to me—that catfish and eels, they love poop and human waste. Plus the blue crabs, so you could go crabbing. You had crabs and all of the, what are called bottom-feeding fish that thrived upon that semi-treated sewage and waste. It was like mana from heaven. So, you could sit crab—and not only just we could get them, but you had crabbers. You had other commercial fishermen, people that were actually selling, that would get them crabs, load them up, and sell them throughout the area.

But you'd get blue crabs. You get your eel, you get your catfish, and you get your carp. Those were like what I call your regular. And then you can definitely get your bluegills and your big pan fish, which are very, very large. Every now and then, you get something very exotic. I remember one time snagging a sturgeon. And sturgeon are scary because they can grow monstrous.

03-00:45:17

Eardley-Pryor:

Like car-sized.

03-00:45:18

Mair: You can have your pole snapped by a sturgeon. But be it as it may, this was a critical part of—

03-00:45:29

Eardley-Pryor: Feeding mouths.

03-00:45:30

Mair: Not only feeding mouths, but it was also you really appreciate river culture and that rural culture, in that this was where your dad and you, your siblings, your uncles, and everybody's got a job to do. Everybody's got to catch something. But there was just the sharing of what's going on, what's happening at the job, my dad just venting about the politics of the day. And it's kind of interesting because my dad, being a union organizer and a union guy, he would literally talk about organizing and the need for men to stand together, that "You've got to get yourself a decent job. You've got to have a union because this is how you protect your rights. Otherwise, they will walk all over you. You had to organize," that a man wasn't good unless he was organized. And my dad was a big organizer.

03-00:46:23

Eardley-Pryor: Was that where you learned it?

03-00:46:24

Mair: Oh, yeah. My dad was a union man, a United Auto Workers Roughneck through and through. And a lot of these men were vets, and so the camaraderie—you had this experience of World War II, plus the experience of unionized labor at the job. These were critical organizing principles. So the labor movement was a very, very critical piece. Because as the civil rights issues came up, as things happened around Peekskill, it's not that you went to the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. The NAACP had men like my dad and others whose organizing within the NAACP were actually—these were labor men. And these labor men were also military units. So they knew unit behavior from their military experience. They knew organizing behavior from their labor experience. And so when they mobilized and they did things, it wasn't haphazard. So there was that experience, and they would talk about these things.

And that my dad always had a line. He says, "You've got to always stick together," because this is the height of some of the ugliest violence in our country. So, Dr. King got assassinated. I was eight years old. And it hit him hard. He says, "If a Christian man can be gunned down like this, we have to stand together." And [I remember] the fires on the beach down there at the Hudson River. We're down there, and he would give a sermon to these brothers, and these uncles, and these friends, these neighbors who were down there. And he would talk about what we need to do is stick together, to defend our people, to protect our people, our families. "I'll be damned if something's going to happen to my woman and my kids," he goes. "I will take this whole

town down.” And they kind of had that pledge, that code, because it was like an outdoor preaching sermon. But it was really the rage against what was happening in America at that time.

03-00:48:35

Mair:

And what was also kind of interesting was that his push-back, like the Joe characters against my brothers’ and sisters’ generation, that counter-culture, the Motown crew, the Cooley High—he felt that as the drug culture was hitting that population, my older siblings, he really was upset about their work ethic. It’s kind of funny because he had this love-hate relationship, because Dickie was growing up to be a handsome young man, a ladies’ man and everything else. But he did not have the work ethic like my father. He was emulating what’s going on around him.

And then they [Dickie and Rickie] were getting into their Black Power movement, and there was the Black Panthers in Peekskill. There was a whole incident where the Black Panther office got shot up in Peekskill, and my father was upset because my brother wasn’t home, and he figured that he was downtown rioting in 1968 with everybody else. And he wasn’t going to have that. I remember him grabbing my brother Dickie by the collar and saying, “Take your ass out of this. I don’t want you caught up in that stuff.” It’s kind of funny because a lot of their arguments are, “Well, don’t you talk about organizing, Dad, and looking out?” He goes, “But we don’t instigate.”

03-00:49:48

Mair:

So for my father, you knew that organizing was a defensive posture. It was not proactive. If I was to say there was a generation gap, the generation gap was that, the African-American culture of W.E.B. Dubois. Where you’re more of a defensive posture and you’re not going out to seek your power or assert your power, it was the Booker T. Washington-esque of knowing your role. But the W.E.B. Dubois side was you’re not going to turn the other cheek either. So, whereas a total Booker T. Washington role, you would be beaten up, you’d take your lumps and you’d skulk away. But that color line that W.E.B. Dubois [represented], that part was where you fight. They crossed that color line, then you’re going to fight, you got a fight from Arnie. Arnold and them will never back down from somebody trespassing upon their civil rights. But Arnold and them would never go over the line.

03-00:50:58

Eardley-Pryor:

Not push that line.

03-00:50:59

Mair:

Exactly. My brother’s generation, they were really, that sixties generation, they were really pushing that line. And my father was always upset about them crossing that line of tension. To him, organizing and being on the defensive and protecting was something entirely different.

03-00:51:15

Eardley-Pryor: By that point in the late sixties, do you have other siblings that showed up on the scene?

03-00:51:18

Mair: Oh, yeah. I'm the middle child, so after me came my sister Veronica.

03-00:51:23

Eardley-Pryor: It was Veronica in '61.

03-00:51:24

Mair: Yes, Veronica Elizabeth, and then Dawn Marie, and Rhonda Yvette, and then Christine Lawanda, who was born on Christmas Day. It's a kind of interesting thing because Christine was Christmas. My birthday, November 27, fell on the floating Thanksgiving week. So I was the Thanksgiving baby, I was the big turkey. And, my brother Ricky would tease me and call me the jive turkey. And now it's on this film, so now here it's recorded. So, if anybody sees this when I'm still living—

03-00:52:06

Eardley-Pryor: Thanks, Ricky.

03-00:52:07

Mair: —and if I'm still living and somebody calls me a jive turkey, I will go full Arnold Mair, "You're crossing that line," on you.

03-00:52:17

Eardley-Pryor: So, they were all born pretty closely after this, kind of every year?

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Mair: Yeah, that was like bump-bump-bump. So, it was like a two-year gap for me, between me and Veronica. But then all four girls pretty much came in quick sequence. In 1965, when Christine was born, she was the prettiest little thing. I just loved the little baby. She was just a little hoot and joy to play with. I was just fascinated. She was like a living little doll.

03-00:52:49

Eardley-Pryor: And you're old enough, around five years old at that time, to really appreciate it and remember it.

03-00:52:53

Mair: Listen, I have vivid memories to when I was three years old, living on Central Avenue because we had a big fire in 1963. And I remember the fire as if it was yesterday because we had this apartment on Lower South Street that crossed—there used to be an old textile mill, and the bridge on the dam of Mcgregory Creek. Because we were on the upper end, and you could throw things over the bridge. And I just remember throwing everything I could get a hand on, just throwing it over the bridge, because I liked the waterfall. There was a big waterfall. It's about three stories up. My father gave me a nice little airplane, the wings that could fly. And that airplane went down over the falls,

and probably countless other of my older brothers' possessions went over the waterfall wall. I don't think anybody ever caught me throwing things.

03-00:54:01

Eardley-Pryor: What was that about for you? What were you doing?

03-00:54:03

Mair: I was just fascinated with the waterfall. The waterfall was part of the old textile mill, powering the waterwheels. When they actually had one that powered their equipment, they used to be there. But now they no longer did anything. It just was now nothing. In fact, just below our house was the Legge Company, and they did stuff with asphalt and whatever. But they were like the third or fourth iteration of some industrial practice. But I could always smell the tar. To this day I can smell that tar smell that came from the Legge Company. They were right adjacent to our home. And on the upper end where the dam was at, where you crossed over, you had the little pond area. And I used to love throwing rocks. I remember one time disturbing a hornet's nest that was underground, and I got the dickens stung out of me.

03-00:55:13

Mair: And then, my sister Dawn in that household, because everything was—the heating of the house was by kerosene. And so, you had the kerosene stoves and whatnot. So they had to stockpile the kerosene inside the house. And I remember my sister Dawn drinking the kerosene and becoming violently ill, and my mom and them getting her and inducing her to expel it, but also rushing her out to the hospital. It was a huge hysteria. Everybody was scared to death. But, in short, after that, nobody kept kerosene up on the apartment where we were all at. It was kept downstairs, because it had an upstairs and downstairs, where my grandfather had his apartment. So, the kerosene was kept with him after that.

03-00:55:48

Eardley-Pryor: So, different family members were in different apartments?

03-00:55:50

Mair: Well, you rented the whole building, and so you had the way we had it. We had the downstairs where people would have probably had a living room, whatnot, that was left for Grandpa. That was John Paul McKenzie. He stayed downstairs. And any of my other uncles that were his sons, when they came in, they would stay with him. And then, the nine of us were all packed upstairs like sardines.

03-00:56:20

Eardley-Pryor: What was the sleeping situation like?

03-00:56:22

Mair: It was curious. It was interesting. That's when I learned about bedbugs, because the houses were typical tenements. You had the old bedbugs. You had the roaches. You had all the things and the critters and creatures. And I

remember my mom constantly spraying and everything else, and so God only knows how many times I got sprayed with stuff. And they would actually pour stuff around the bed frames and along the cracks in the wall because the bedbugs would literally get into anything and hide.

But they almost, at least monthly, were spraying heavy-duty pesticides inside the house. And so, again, you just never are aware of it growing up. This was just how you grew up.

03-00:57:11

Eardley-Pryor: It's the early sixties, and this is around the time that Rachel Carson's talking about DDT, and people are first learning about it.

03-00:57:15

Mair: Exactly. And so, we were pretty much putting that stuff on ourselves. And so, you just figure that chemicals were wondrous chemicals and processes. If chemistry was being put to use, then it couldn't be harmful, could it? But, I just never, ever thought about it until my college years, until I got to the environmental movement really, how toxic my background, from chemicals, pesticides—that we really lived in a very loaded community. Can we pause right here for a second?

03-00:57:52

Eardley-Pryor: Sure. Of course.

(break in audio)

03-00:57:57

Eardley-Pryor: All right, continuing here. So, what other memories do you have from childhood that you want to share?

03-00:58:01

Mair: Well, I'd really like to talk about—I point out the line or the thread of culture, custom, and heritage, and one of the critical pieces of culture, two pieces. And that is more than just the fishing. It's really that culture still depending upon the land. So, whether it is fishing or whether it's hunting, these are two skills.

03-00:58:23

Eardley-Pryor: Hunting was another part of the thing for the family?

03-00:58:24

Mair: These are two skills that one had to draw upon. And both require patience, but also both require reliance on an elder for tradition. So this was one of those opportunities where my grandfather John Paul McKenzie can transfer his heritage, that began with him in South Carolina, that actually goes all the way back to Zion and Barry McKenzie. The actual art of hunting was a very powerful thing because my grandfather, he was always an industrious man.

When they brought him to Westchester County, he too had to find himself some work. And one of his jobs that he had was when they were building the Tappan Zee Bridge. He was amongst the labor gangs, especially the African-Americans, that were lowered below the Hudson River when they were pouring the footings on the Tappan Zee Bridge. So, they just replaced that bridge. And what broke my heart about the replacement of that bridge was knowing how my grandfather basically risked his life in literally pouring the footings. A lot of that dangerous work was done by men of color, and he was part of the crew. So, to me the replacement of that bridge is also replacing a little bit of heritage.

But, John Paul was very fascinating. He was the father of Margaret Elizabeth McKenzie.

03-00:59:47

Eardley-Pryor: Your mom?

03-00:59:48

Mair:

My mom. And he did not have the technical skills or the vocational skills as my father, Arnold [Jr.]. But he was more of a tinkerer. He could get things up and running. He could tinker. He was a classic country tinkerer, the guy that would somehow get a contraption going on some labor-saving doohickey. He would always manage to do that.

Another one of his big sides was cutting trees down. He actually traveled around clearing and cutting brush. He had two big chainsaws, and he could make them things dance. And he would shimmy up a tree without the leather belt or anything. The guy could just climb. He would get up there, and he knew how to—he could drop and fell a tree anywhere.

And I went with Grandpa on several things. That was where I could make a little extra money. I never knew how much Grandpa was really lining his pockets, but for a kid in the sixties and seventies to get two dollars, three dollars, that was when penny candy was penny candy. What, you now pay a dollar for [candy]? Insofar as a candy bar, that was a nickel back then. And so, to get a dollar from my grandfather—and you were working. He worked you. But that was one aspect of it. That was where you're kind of like, okay, I got a dollar, but I really didn't like hanging out with Grandpa. And he would regale you with the stories of the community, of the family, and of the South and southern culture.

But where you really got into it is when you were out fishing with Grandpa and when you were out hunting with my grandfather, learning how to handle a weapon. It's one thing that Grandpa knew how to do. He knew how to shoot. He could knock a hair off the top of a rabbit at 100 yards. The man was that good. And you have to be a bit of a marksman when you're doing small game hunting.

03-01:01:57

Eardley-Pryor: Where would y'all go hunting? Bear Mountain State Park was right across the river from you.

03-01:01:59

Mair: Well, you did not go hunting in state parks, but you could pretty much, back in those days, hunt anywhere around Peekskill. Fort Hill, one of the places that we went up in the woods is Fort Hill, and you can go up there and get some small game up there. Blue Mountain Reservation, which was another big piece of parcel; St. Peter's, which was an orphanage, but the woods around St. Peter's, up on the Bear Mountain Exchange and Bypass, which was up—there's a Peekskill water tower. You go hunting up in the woods around there.

It was not as built up then as it was now. You could absolutely walk, and I did. You could walk down 202 with your shotgun slung over your shoulder with the breech open, and a cop would go by and not even think a thing. You got your hunting tags on you, just go on by about your business. But an African-American child today could not walk anywhere with a weapon like that and probably not risk their lives. But I could grow up and carry my weapon and it wasn't an issue. When you're out there, you see the pair or the group, and it was nothing because everybody did it.

It was a true experience, but it was one of those things where you would get more stories of the family. It was a lot of the norms and the exchange, but just learning how to shoot, learning how to patiently hold your weapon, learning how to take your time, learning how to sight. These were things that were verbally passed down, and that was a big deal.

03-01:03:38

Mair: A couple of times Grandpa's instructions also came with a hand. So you get up there, and sometimes I just wanted to shoot. And I'd be just shooting and making noise. And Grandpa, that's when the hand comes in—you get the hand lesson, a pop upside the head. He'd say, "What the hell are you doing? Are you looking over there? Are you sure that you're shooting at something? What if somebody's coming over?" This is where you get the riot act of "You're not the only one out here. You really have to be alert. Not only alert and looking for your game, but also being mindful of what's happening around you, making sure no other hunters or other people are nearby. And you're just out here like a cowboy discharging your weapon." And, I remember I started out with my bb gun, and I graduated from my bb gun to a .22. And then I had a 20-gauge over-and-under.

03-01:04:32

Eardley-Pryor: What does that mean, over-and-under?

03-01:04:34

Mair:

So, a double-barrel shotgun is when they're side by side, the barrels. An over-and-under is when they're like that [*shows barrel lined up vertically with hands*]. It's still a double-barrel, but it's an over-and-under. So it's just the way the barrels were positioned on the weapon. And, so you get up there, you learn your different types of shots, everything from buckshot all the way down to what you call a double-0 buck, which is like three big ball bearings. I like those shots because it's still the same kick, but it just wasn't a wide spray, because you wanted to see the bark jump off the tree.

And, when I was out there, a lot of times I was goofing off. I was a kid. It was a big pyrotechnic tool, and it went bang. And so, there also came a point in time in my life I got upset shooting things. I really did.

03-01:05:33

Eardley-Pryor:

When was that?

03-01:05:35

Mair:

It's kind of interesting. It's when I was about fifteen, sixteen—no, fourteen, fifteen.

03-01:05:40

Eardley-Pryor:

Why?

03-01:05:42

Mair:

It happened when I was out with a group of friends. We were out hunting, and typical kids, they're normally shooting at stuff, just shooting at things. And a friend of mine, Bobby Gilleo, he shot a brown owl. And it really upset me. It really upset me. I was like, "What did you do that for?" Because first and foremost—okay, I was prejudiced. If he shot a pigeon, I probably wouldn't have felt as bad. But, to me it was defenseless, and it was like, why? It's not something you can take home. Why did you do that? And I was upset. And I wanted to slap him with the butt of my gun. I was upset. I was really, really upset.

And, interestingly enough, I just did not go out much after that. It was that kind of—and you never think that something that like that would affect you, but just looking at it and just when it passed, he shot a brown owl. I'll never forget it. It's one of those weird little things. And it's like the thing that turns you away. But I still would go out. My dad, when he went to the rifle range, he had a big .30-06, and he'd be there. I'd go out with Dad, me and my brothers, and mainly Emerson, because Ricky and Dickie were too busy hanging out and doing other things.

03-01:07:09

Eardley-Pryor:

You've suggested that Ricky and Dickie got caught up in the midst of the sixties moment and through the early seventies. Also, at the same time that there was this kind of a new cultural shift that's happening, and they represent that. It's also a time of new drug use.

03-01:07:25

Mair: Oh, yeah.

03-01:07:25

Eardley-Pryor: You've suggested that was a challenge for them.

03-01:07:28

Mair: Well, it was not only a big challenge. It was the thing. It was that [Timothy] Leary of tuning out and dropping out. It was more than just LSD. It was all sorts of drugs. But what really hooked them was heroin.

03-01:07:43

Eardley-Pryor: When was this?

03-01:07:44

Mair: This was, I would want to say, about '69, '70.

03-01:07:50

Eardley-Pryor: So, you're barely ten.

03-01:07:52

Mair: But still, you're around. You're awake. You're full on.

03-01:07:59

Eardley-Pryor: And those brothers are your role models.

03-01:08:00

Mair: They were there. And, what happened was my uncle Richard had just got back from Vietnam, Richard McKenzie, my mother's next-younger brother. And, Benjamin's the baby, but Richard was just next to him. Richard got back from Vietnam, and he had a heavy habit.

And, I never knew that my uncle Leslie, who they call Uncle Ace—which is my father's baby brother—I never knew [at that time] that Uncle Ace was a junkie. We called him The Executive Junkie because he just hid his thing really well. And a lot of things, the tips, were there. But we just thought Ace was doing his cool thing and his little thing. But that was part of him, that junkie lean and nod. But he just had an art form and a style to it. He did not look like the junkie that was going to almost fall over and touch the ground and then bounce back up. He just had his way about him that he just hid it well.

But anyway, Richard and Leslie hooked up, and that's when I remember my father having words with his brother about, are he and Richard doing that stuff at our house, and what the hell's going on? And I remember my father, because Dad was a typical, "You don't do that stuff around my kids," and "I don't want any of that stuff near me." To him, it was like having the devil itself visit your home. And they did. They shot up in the house. I've seen them shoot up and what have you.

03-01:09:38

Mair:

But the long and short of it was that when Richard got—because Richard hung out with my brother Dickie, and the next thing you know Dickie was using. And then Ricky seeing Dickie using, he got into it. And naturally Esther, she followed. So the three of them started using together. And then, once they started using it, then I just noticed the different class and sets of friends that were all coming by, and then the parties.

And a lot of those parties were basically when Mom and Dad and them were out, because then Esther, Ricky and Dickie, they were the oldest and they had to take care of the rest of us. And Dickie being the oldest, he was like it had formed. And so, when Mom and Dad had a big shift or what have you, they would time it so they would then have a party at the house. And then you would almost have a—it looked like a mini-Woodstock. They would have the music blasting. They'd have the little blue light or the red light or the green light with the party. A lot of Motown tunes and what have you would be blasting. And everyone would be dancing and whatnot. Right under the back porch and up in the bathroom, you had junkies shooting up.

03-01:10:52

Eardley-Pryor:

So when you're seeing this, you're kind of caught between. Here's your father, who's the son of an alcoholic, saying, "This is not the right thing. I won't have it in my house." And then you're also having these older siblings that are having this kind of neat, cool, cultural experience, but also with heavy, dangerous drugs involved. Where were you coming at for this? How did it affect you?

03-01:11:11

Mair:

The thing is my cousin Johnny Boy, he had an overdose. It's the first time I've ever seen an overdose. And, it's not something you ever want to see, because in this particular overdose, it was not that they stopped breathing. But this is the—you know that they vomit a lot. And, they're trying to get him straight and what have you, and he didn't make it. He didn't make it. And, Johnny Boy, it was Johnny Boy Johnson. And, he O.D.'ed [over-dosed]. That was a big deal. It was not a pretty sight.

But the point being is that it was right at the same time that, in school, they're giving you these "Don't do drugs" scenarios. Your schools were giving you your videos, your health videos on what you should and should not do, and good boy behavior, bad behavior, the adolescence films. So, part of your curriculum was about drugs. They were really pushing the anti-drug message.

03-01:12:26

Eardley-Pryor:

This is the early seventies?

03-01:12:27

Mair:

This is the early seventies. And what's really funny is that I didn't need it. I saw it. I just knew that I'm not touching that stuff. I would not go near it. But

you saw it firsthand, and then you just saw the characters that my brothers and them—and the stuff that they would get into just to maintain their habit, because what they would end up doing is stealing from Dad and Mom. So, Dad and Mom, they were already stretching to make ends meet. And Mom would have places where she would put her money, and Dad would have places where he'd put their money. They would have their, what I called the running-around money. They really didn't have big savings. That's one of the things about a working-class family. You literally lived paycheck to paycheck.

[A portion of this interview has been sealed until 2045.]

03-01:16:26

Eardley-Pryor: Tell me more about that [drug culture]. What do you mean? What do you mean how it's handled today?

03-01:16:28

Mair: Well, because then it was viewed as a problem that only afflicted the Black and Hispanic communities. And it was concentrated because a lot of the Blacks who were coming home from Vietnam, they were coming back addicted, like my Uncle Richard, to heroin. And so, between semi-employed or marginally employed and also addicted to heroin, and heroin was the place that organized crime, it flooded it through the urban centers. And then it went into the suburbs. But, at that particular point in time the crisis was restricted almost to the urban community.

[*Knock on door.*]

03-01:17:06

Eardley-Pryor: I'll pause for just a second.

(break in audio)

03-01:17:07

Mair: So, going back to the point, the drug culture then, as it is now, is not really different. What's really different now is how even that is stratified amongst race on the treatment. When it's looked at as people of color, it's looked at as the pestilence that people of color are carrying. And so, therefore it's heavily criminalized. And again, that cop dynamic dealing with people of color, all the other repressive aspects goes into overdrive. And contrast that to this day, where policemen have to be almost like nurses and doctors. They've got to do everything to try to save a child.

03-01:17:49

Eardley-Pryor: Because the opioid addiction today is—whites are also involved?

03-01:17:54

Mair: Well, it came from the pharmaceutical-grade opioids that were pushed and which is basically much more pure and stronger than the heroin that my siblings were addicted to. So, not only is the current opioid crisis severe, but

the type of smack that they're getting—and they don't want to call it “smack.” They don't want to call it by its old names. They'll call it Percocet. They'll call it whatever the current industrial name that they gave it. But that just covers up the fact that they're still smoking, snorting and shooting smack.

And so, the thing is that, because they're getting it out of Mom and Dad's [medicine cabinet], the kids of the nineties were having these pill parties. It was like the biggest thing that kids were doing in schools. And so, it's part of the rave culture that came during the nineties, where kids were taking drugs that they thought would keep them up and partying all night, even though the opioids are actually depressants, they won't keep you up. But the point of the matter is they're highly addictive. But they do give you that heroin high.

And the ready availability, you could have a steady supply, and you'd walk around—and by the way, it was very cheap. It was very cheap. I would submit that the opioids today were cheaper than when my brother and them were having to score it off the street.

03-01:19:27

Eardley-Pryor: Whatever happened to Esther, to Fred, to Ricky and Dickie?

03-01:19:31

Mair: Well, what happened over time, they eventually kicked their addictions the hard way, and it was through incarceration. So they would eventually then—because opioids were viewed as criminal deviants, they would then eventually pay the criminal deviant price. And so, they would detox when incarcerated.

And eventually Dickie, while doing time for his drug offense, they had college courses. And so, he actually got his GED, and he actually enrolled into Long Island University. He was doing well there until a romance that he had went south, and then that's when it was alleged that he was selling drugs on campus. And then they just basically expelled him and his roommate. But that reality was that the girl that he was having a relationship with happened to be, I think, one of the deans there's daughter. But definitely, when Dickie and them threw parties, I would not be surprised that Dickie had people there, that was just part of the scene.

But he got tossed under a bus. It was kind of notorious. It was in the *New York Post*. You have this little picture of your brother and his Vietnam-era vet friend who was in a wheelchair being evicted from the LIU campus for allegedly selling drugs. It's kind of a humiliating and embarrassing thing. But, what that did do was that it forced him to find other means to make a living.

03-01:21:20

Mair: And so, Dickie became an entrepreneur. He started out hustling. You go down to the ports in New York City, you could always get stuff. Everything, the click-clacks were the big thing. And then they had these little bobby-head things, the sun visors. And parade events and all these other things, he hustled

that into a little bit of money hustle. And then he got into a little meat, and he eventually got into—he was selling meats and what have you—and he opened up a little meat store in Peekskill. He opened up a couple of convenience stores. He actually had a store—I think his first store was in Yonkers, New York, and then Peekskill. But then he had a couple little side convenience stores. And so, at the end of the day, because of his checkered past, he had to come up with a viable—and to the point where he actually had a home. He had seven kids.

But, what ended up happening was Dickie died at the age of 52 from a disease that he probably contracted when he was a young kid. See, the other risk of the IV [intravenous] drug use is that you can absolutely pick up the various other viruses like hepatitis C, and it just incubates in your body. And all you need is the chance in which you're at a level of stress that it activates that virus, and you ended up developing cirrhosis of the liver. This is why hep C is very dangerous, is that, A, it's a virus that's in your body, so you're not going to be put on any liver donation list, because it's chronic and it's stored in your body. And the other piece is that when it's triggered, it attacks the liver. And when it attacks the liver, it's pretty much downhill.

03-01:23:11

Mair:

So, the irony and the pain that I felt in his loss—because he and I eventually became very, very close—was that the unfairness of it all, that he finally got it right. He's well over two and a half decades clean, and he's got these kids, and he's a stand-up guy, well-loved in the community. And all of a sudden, he's got this very virulent hepatitis C. And what's really sad is that just a few years later, they come up with a vaccine for hep C, which is the other irony of ironies.

And so, he died very young, and it was a co-morbidity related to his drug addiction that he contracted. This is another thing that kids and people don't think about when they're doing this stuff—what you're putting yourself and your body at risk for. And, unlike my uncle Leslie, who actually—my uncle Leslie, a group of them, Uncle Leslie, Uncle Richard, and my cousin Anthony, they died of acquired immune deficiency, AIDS, because they constantly shared their drugs amongst one another. They actually ended up passing AIDS between the three of them. And they all pretty much within a year died of one another. This is during the nineties.

03-01:24:32

Mair:

And so, Ace, it was really amazing, was that Ace lived into his sixties. And so, we always called him The Executive Junkie. He actually was amongst the last to die of AIDS. Esther, she died. When she kicked her habit of heroin, she went to another depressant. This is another issue of drug addiction, is that people use other drugs or other things as a crutch or as a bridge to kick the addiction of heroin. And she turned to alcohol. So when she had those cravings, she would drink. And she died at the ripe old age of thirty-two.

And that is the reason why I never—since my sister died of that, because I already knew about what alcohol did on my father's side and what he had to do growing up. And then when it took Esther at that age, she died of alcohol-related diabetes. It was really painful because her heart and other organs were still kicking and strong. So they would be reviving her, and then she'd go out. But she was having chronic organ failure as it was related to that disease. So, it was a really painful death for her.

03-01:25:41

Eardley-Pryor: That's the early eighties?

03-01:25:43

Mair: Yeah. And so, my nephews, she had two boys, John Raphael Mair and Quinn Edward Mair. And I took my nephew Quinn. Quinn went with me to college up in Binghamton. He stayed with me, and my other nephew stayed with my mom because that way it was not—my mom was kind of getting kind of old, and it was a lot more of a handful. And Quinn was being a character. He was really a handsome young man, but he was really being—he was beyond the realm of somebody my mother's age could take care of. It was just, she just could not handle a rebellious grandchild.

03-01:26:30

Eardley-Pryor: So, he came with you to where you ended up going to university. Let's talk a little bit about your education. Even to go back, what kind of things were you into as a kid?

03-01:26:39

Mair: Sure. The thing is that the great thing about Peekskill is that, unlike any other place, Westchester County during the sixties had to go through a number of the surrounding municipalities that we competed against. Our school district, Peekskill City School District, competed against Ossining, Yonkers, White Plains, Newburgh, Beacon, Poughkeepsie. A lot of those other surrounding school districts, the racial settling patterns, they basically had segregated schools. And a lot of them were under court-ordered desegregation orders. And the racism and the violence in those schools during sixties and seventies was pretty high.

I remember, it's 1976, where people don't realize the bicentennial—it's poignant for two reasons, because I had a paper route. I had one of the largest paper routes in Peekskill because that was my little side hustle. That was the JP, the John Paul McKenzie in me. In fact, John Paul would call me Paperboy, my grandpa, because he would rib me. But my grandfather loved the fact that I had this massive paper route. And I was killing it with the cash. And my grandfather was like—it's kind of funny. I was his favorite, and it was who ended up with who. So, I ended up developing this shine and love for my grandfather because not only was he—he had his dances, his sayings, and when we were out fishing and hunting, Grandpa was just a hoot. But, I had my paper route, and that was one of the cool little hustles.

03-01:28:16

Eardley-Pryor: So, in '76, there's—

03-01:28:17

Mair:

This is actually from '74, from fourteen to seventeen I had this paper route, making money. And I was financially really independent because my mom and dad were always still struggling. Everybody had a little something. My other siblings, they were between this and that. My only mistake was that I refused to get one of those little city jobs when I was twelve in 1972. Had I taken it, I would be tier one in my retirement system right now. It's one of those weird things that I couldn't see myself at Parks and Recreation like my brother and them up there with that little stick with the point at the end of it. I would rather deliver papers, man.

And not to mention I got tips and everything else. And so I earned, no exaggeration, there were times when I would earn as low as about forty dollars a week. And there would be times, because I set up this monthly system of payments—show you what a hustler I was, because I had people who were either on fixed incomes or on welfare. I didn't care. I just cared about getting money. And I had to sell papers as long as I'd come up with a system.

03-01:29:22

Mair:

So what I would do is, if you were fixed income or welfare, your check didn't come in [every week]. So what I would do is, I created what I called a monthly system. And I'd tag them, the collection of payment from them, on the monthly. So I floated their fees, I floated the cost of their paper. And then on that [day of the] month, then I'd come and I collect four weeks instead of the one-week hustle. And they were so happy that I just respected them. They were my biggest tippers. I would be getting three-to-five-dollar tips and then, come Christmastime, almost five-to-ten-dollar tips.

And Harry Brooks, who was the owner of *Peekskill News*, swore I was running a scam or something. Because when we had to count out and separate the money—because you had your collection cards, and they roughly had an idea what you should be getting a week given the volume of papers that you had. And then you've got the little stubs so they can quickly—and so Harry and his wife, they had this whole thing they run your cards through and then what you had to surrender. And then they'd give you your pay, which is out of that, like about almost fifteen percent of the cost goes back to you. That was the paperboy's pay. So if you got no tips, your raw pay would have been about ten to fifteen dollars, your raw pay. And that's still a lot of money back then, man.

03-01:30:42

Mair:

But then all of a sudden they noticed that some weeks I'm forty, fifty dollars, and some were two or three standard deviations above the average paperboy. And so, they're like, "You got something wrong with your math skills? How

are you getting this money?" I go, "Tips." And they go, "Well, what are you doing so much that they like to give you tips like this?" And I go, "It's none of your business." I says, "Here's what you guys would do," because you had this big black pouch that you collected all the money in. So you had to pour it out, and you had to stack the coins. They literally would count up everything that you collected. And then, you had their algorithm, which they would take their costs and then kick the rest back to you.

So, when you look at this big wad of loot that I bring in, and then what they had to kick back to me, all the other paperboys would stop and look, and they're like, 'Dude, what are you doing?' I was rocking it. And then, the monthlies would come. And it wasn't until when I got up to leave that I told them about my system. And because of that system, Harry and them at *Peekskill News* created that monthly system. That's when they started. They took it for themselves, and they realized they could—because their whole mantra was "Sell more papers."

03-01:31:58

Eardley-Pryor: And you found the way.

03-01:32:00

Mair: And so, I found the way. I made this fortune, and then I finally let them in on my hustle. But by that time, I was—but I was making so much money—because the thing that I left my paper route for, because I got my real job which I really loved, which was working at Sears & Roebuck. And so, from 1978 to '79, I worked at Sears Roebuck. It was a big deal for me to go to work with a tie.

03-01:32:23

Eardley-Pryor: So, that was your senior year, junior, senior year in high school?

03-01:32:26

Mair: Yeah, junior, senior years of high school. So, I just liked the fact as a salesman that you had to wear a suit, a shirt and tie. And to me, it was still different from what my dad did. It was no factories. You were out there, and Sears at that time was the bomb. And then there's all these discounts and all these cool things. When you're working inside Sears, you got tipped off on stuff that didn't sell. And when you're at Sears back then in the seventies—so recreational equipment, I got my first fiberglass boat because somebody ordered it, the catalog order. It didn't work out, so it sat around for the longest. They needed the warehouse space, and so this thing went down literally for a song. And then I had my discount on top of it. So, I got this boat. I got this massive—I think it was a fifteen-foot jon boat. And I got it for the whopping sum of about thirty-five dollars for a fifteen-foot fiberglass jon boat.

03-01:33:21

Eardley-Pryor: That you could take out to the Hudson [River].

03-01:33:23

Mair:

That I could take out to the Hudson. In fact, I did one better. I went out, I fixed it, because we would tie it on top of the car. I got myself an electric trolling motor. I waited around, and then I found out when I was there that you can go check the other Sears, what they've got laying around. So, I knew, being the hustle, I just knew exactly what I wanted. And so, getting guns, which is what I bought, fishing poles, trolling motors because I couldn't—gas was ridiculous, so you get a trolling motor, you can still do the same thing.

And I had a '62 Chevy Impala, white. So when I was sixteen years old, I was able to buy my car. So I bought my own. I bought that with my paperboy money. So at the age of sixteen, 1976, I bought myself this white Chevy Impala. And even my brothers were like, "We're not worthy." It's like my brothers would come, "Yo, man, can we borrow?" Hell no.

There's two things I knew about. I knew about the hustle, because that's the other thing. At sixteen, I had my paper route. And then I start loading papers, newspapers, in my car, man, and driving around. And so, I just became more efficient, and my route grew bigger because now I had a ride.

03-01:34:41

Mair:

So, I had that, I had a car that you could just tie your boat up on the roof. And we'd go out fishing, me and my buddies, Clifford Abner, Chucky Johnson, Michael—what's Michael's last name? I'll recall in a minute—Mikey Andrews. And so, we would all go out, man, and we'd get the boat, man. We'd go up to the reservoir, up across the river. So we would hit the reservoirs, and we'd put the boat in.

And also there was a big lake up at Mohansic Park, which now I think is FDR Park in Yorktown. And you put the boat in, man, and Clifford and them, they'd be yelling at me, like "Aaron, turn the motor off," because they want to stop, sit and fish. And I was like—it was kind of funny because back in the seventies the big thing was the Super Fly and the big gangster movies.

03-01:35:37

Eardley-Pryor:

Yeah, the blaxploitation movies.

03-01:35:38

Mair:

The blaxploitation movies. Well, they were into the ride, the rides in those blaxploitation movies. I did the same thing, but in my imagination. So when I would trip out and go on-my-own-zone thing, instead of a pimped-out ride, I was in my pimped-out boat. And I was cruising around Mohansic Lake. And I had my little pole drifting, hanging out. Every now and then something would snag because it would go. I would get something. But my friends just hated going out with me because I literally would be just with my little boat.

03-01:36:07

Eardley-Pryor:

Cruising around that lake.

03-01:36:08

Mair: I was cruising, man. It was like a Harlem boy with a pimp ride driving down Fifth Avenue. I was just with my boat and my trolling motor. It was the biggest thing. Because you work after school all week, and then come Sunday—because you work Saturday—but come Sunday, man, I was boat's on top of my car, man, and off I'd go fishing.

03-01:36:39

Eardley-Pryor: Was car culture a big thing, too? You talk about having this amazing car. Your dad worked for the GM plant.

03-01:36:43

Mair: Oh, yeah. Well, there's two things. One of the things I always looked forward to, and one of those sore spots with my dad, one of those broken-heart moments, was Dad told me that if I graduate he'd get me a car. He says, "If you graduate from high school, you're going to get this," because my brothers, Dickie and them, because of the drug culture, they dropped out. And for him, it was like a big disappointment, a big downer. Here they were with the trouble with the law and the drugs. So he gave me an Apollo project. You land on the moon, you get yourself a vehicle. I'll put in a word for you. And that carried a lot. And it broke my heart when he didn't come through on it.

But my dad, his guys, him and my uncles, part of that river culture, part of that down on the Hudson River in Peekskill, New York, they would have these big muscle cars. They would have these big cars, and it would come down. And as a kid, remember, that outdoor culture, so you're fishing, you're hunting or whatever, and then you've got these cool hangouts when dad and his guys came together.

And you're just a young guy. You're just sizing yourself up for these big guys. And your dad's one of the guys that everybody looked up to. Here's Silky. Here's Big Arnie. And he's holding court. It's sort of like an episode of ["King of the Hill" cartoon television, with] Hank Hill's son. I was like Bobby. I was just weird and just like my dad. I just wanted to vibe. And Dad looked at me like Hank Hill looked at Bobby. "That boy's touched in the head. Something's wrong with my boy," because I wasn't his model of what a macho young man would be.

03-01:38:33

Mair: But he had the equivalent of those characters. My uncle Warren was like Boomhauer, and he talked like him. You remember? And he was deep South Carolinian drawl dialect. And, it's one of those things. I never understood what my uncle Warren ever said. To this day I never understood that man to the day he died. Uncle Warren would just—

03-01:39:02

Eardley-Pryor: But somehow everyone knew.

03-01:39:02

Mair:

And everybody knew that, “yep, yep.” It’s just like that scene with all them going, “Yep, yep, yep.” And Uncle Warren, he worked for the water department in Peekskill. Let’s see. My Uncle Richard Jackson, he became the commissioner of the water department, the first African-American commissioner of any major—this is in Westchester County, at that day. So one of the things is because of that, a lot of relatives were going into—a lot of my other uncles who were World War II and Korean War vets, they all went into law enforcement in and around Westchester County. So a lot of them coming up, my mother and a lot of them, were established. So a lot of them were getting civil service jobs at various points in the community.

But our cousins that worked for the law enforcement, especially for the county police, they would have to patrol up and down Route 9A. And so, what’s funny is that these guys, my dad and them, they would be drag racing on Route 9. My uncle Roy—my mother’s brother, one of her younger brothers—he rolled his car on Route 9 drag racing and got seriously, seriously hurt.

But by and large, though, it was still—when you’re young and you’re seeing these big vehicles, and you hear the growl of those engines. And those engines, I tell people, you just turn on a drag strip, that growl, that big barking of that car. And the heavier it was, it was like—and they would smoke the tires down here. You’re just like a kid at Candy Land. All those macho things that stereotypical male behavior was wrapped around, it was there. And sure, my grandfather, when he was in South Carolina, he ran liquor. So they had the half-fast cars.

03-01:40:51

Eardley-Pryor: This is JP?

03-01:40:52

Mair:

This is John Paul McKenzie. His sons grew up around it. And so that tinkering? You had to keep the vehicle running so John Paul McKenzie could get his moonshine all around that whole section of Spartanburg-Greenville, into Rutherfordton, North Carolina. So they would go from the northern corner of South Carolina, which is Spartanburg-Greenville. And they would cross over into that Asheville, Rutherfordton, and Hendersonville area. That’s where John Paul would run his stuff.

And so a lot of them had that hands-on thing. But like I said, all that came together. You would have everything from stories from South Carolina and running liquor, to Dad talking tough.

03-01:41:31

Eardley-Pryor: Uncles drag racing.

03-01:41:33

Mair:

But also down to drag. But at the end of the day, that vehicle was wrapped around it, and the reverence for the vehicle, and the fact that all these boys—

GM boys—they had their stuff. And then the boys from Rahway, New Jersey would come looking for trouble, and that's the guys [from] the Ford [factory]. So, you would have literally Ford versus General Motors.

03-01:41:48

Eardley-Pryor: Those are workers from the Ford plant [who] would come?

03-01:41:49

Mair: From the Ford, they would come up to Peekskill looking for trouble, looking for action. And the boys from General Motors were ready to give it.

03-01:41:56

Eardley-Pryor: And you said you had family members who were law enforcement?

03-01:42:00

Mair: Yeah. So, Cousin June and them, they would basically be up there, and they would let them know when they could run. So, these guys would get up on—

03-01:42:08

Eardley-Pryor: So, they had police coverage on for blocking off the highway in some ways?

03-01:42:10

Mair: Well, let me put it like this. All of those two cars would be running on the road. So how they did it—I know that this will probably cause some hair on people, say, “Why did you tell that?” But the fact of the matter is, everybody was kind of in on it. And then, like I said, that was part of their manhood, their coming to gather. It was literally hunting, vehicles racing, their work, the war. These were things that were big symbols and things to them.

But, for a kid growing up in that, the backdrop was always the natural beauty that was around, which was all—as I say, the crucible where that all came together was on the riverfront.

03-01:42:55

Eardley-Pryor: It sounds like it was all at the same time. You had the car culture, you had the working culture, but you also were in the midst of all this nature.

03-01:43:01

Mair: Yeah, in the midst of all this nature. It was still a lot of place and space for us to get to gather. And this was also very common amongst the Hudson River.

In fact, another long-lost piece of Hudson River culture for Black men, like my family who gathered on the river, they had their spots. This was the only place they could afford to go. And so, not only were there lots of Blacks who were subsistence fishermen, but their culture, their community culture, was along the waterfront. Because these waterfronts were often abandoned. Because at that time, a lot of the industrialization was around them. And then they no longer made those heavy manufacturing—so these waterfronts were pretty much abandoned. And so, it was the place and domain of these men and

their families. And from New York City, going all the way up to Albany, New York, you will hear these very, very common stories.

It wasn't until this environmental movement that I was able to hear and connect with a lot of these stories. And, there are a couple of people I know that have tracked them. But the point of the matter is these were very critical pieces. So when the regentrification and the discovery after the Clean Water Act, and people, municipalities now wanted to own back, take back their waterfronts. What they did take away, from these communities of color, was a point of culture for African-Americans coming from the South and coming from the Caribbean, congregated on these spots. And now these spots are no longer available for them.

And as their redesigned recreational escapes from modern cities, towns, and municipalities, none of their uses were ever factored in to that. This is a huge cultural loss but another point of environmental justice or injustice where land-use patterns as an experience by non-whites was not even factored in, and that you actually had this entire system of people out there. Pete Seeger knew about it.

03-01:45:04

Eardley-Pryor: Tell me what you mean.

03-01:45:05

Mair: Well, people like Pete Seeger and others—again, Paul Robeson did something called the Peekskill Riots. A lot of people realized that the reason why you had the Blacks organizing that event up there, you had a lot of Black vets that lived in the city that were also part of the big labor movement, part of the old Socialist movement, the old Communist movement out of Harlem or whatever. But now they're living up in Westchester. In fact, one of the writers for the *Amsterdam News*, he lived in Peekskill where he would go on a train.

So Peekskill had a lot of what I call hard-left Blacks that lived there. And they had organized a rally out on Oregon Road. They call it Peekskill Riots, but actually it's Cortlandt. It's like a little outer 'burb of Peekskill. It was where the drive-in was. Paul Robeson was going to be their keynote speaker. And Paul Robeson, at that particular time, they were accusing him of being a Communist, blah-blah-blah. But really what he cared about and what he spoke about was the right to a living wage, the right to being treated as a man. All of us are men. He was a civil rights activist. He was a labor rights activist. So men like my father and all like that, he was basically hitting their sweet spot. He was calling in their sweet spot. And so, they were all assaulted by a lot of the whites from the surrounding areas, incited by the *Peekskill Evening Star* that these Communists were coming to town. And the police and state police looked the other way.

03-01:46:35

Eardley-Pryor: When was this? Were you a kid then?

03-01:46:38

Mair:

This was in the early fifties, the Peekskill Riots were in the early fifties. And so, Pete [Seeger] was injured. But the point of the matter is, though, he settled right in that area. And, I tell a lot of folks, “Well, it’s the environment, this.” I think it was a little bit of everything. But the thing is that people don’t realize that Pete Seeger wrote the score to the civil rights movement. “We Shall Overcome” is one of his songs. At the end of the day he was a labor rights organizer.

And Peekskill still had—and that whole Westchester County area had—people like my dad who were big labor rights guys. And these people were very critical to, I think, Pete’s deep ideological underpinning. And Pete, when he was fighting to save and clean up the Hudson River, he built the [Sloop] Clearwater. He literally went to all the communities, and Peekskill was one of his main whole communities between Peekskill, what have you. And he played for the community. He played for us. I was a child when I heard Pete. But, the thing is that my dad and all them, they knew Pete.

03-01:47:47

Eardley-Pryor:

Was politics something that you—I’m just thinking in the seventies, you’re coming of age in the seventies. Watergate and all that—

03-01:47:55

Mair:

I was a newspaper boy. Listen, I was a newspaper boy. So, the Yom Kippur War, all these things, Nixon, all that—as all these things, I would stop sometimes on the corner, and I would just sit down and just to read the paper. If it was a real good news day, I was late coming home. But, the politics of the day, our family were political animals. My dad was a voracious political animal. He was astute in his observations and wise in his instruction. Dad was a tactical man.

So, he would tell you—my father had a couple of very powerful statements. He would say to my brother Dickie—because he would yell at him, I remember one time he really ripped into my brother Dickie because Dickie was not shaping up. He was drug-addicted and all this other stuff. My dad was really disappointed. My father said, “Listen, nobody likes a petty crook. If you’re going to be a crook, you’re going to be a gangster.” He goes, ‘You’re going to do this stuff, then be Al Capone. Run it. Own it. But don’t be a petty lowlife crook.’ In other words, to him, *organize*. You had to be organized crime. Dad said, “If you’re going to go that route and you still want my love”—

03-01:49:19

Eardley-Pryor:

Do it right.

03-01:49:19

Mair:

—then *do* it. Be *organized*. Even crime with my dad had to be organized, you dig? And so, my father, even in giving bad advice to my brother, was calling

for my brother to be an organized crook if he's going to be a damn crook, not a petty crook. My father couldn't stand a petty, sniveling crook. Nobody likes a lowlife thief. If you're going to be it, take the queen's jewels. Be something that people tip their hat to.

So, my dad was always about organizing. So, Dad, when you talk about politics, whatever you did, when we mobilize, when we act, we came together as family. And it was a racial incident at Blue Mountain—

03-01:49:59

Eardley-Pryor: What's Blue Mountain?

03-01:50:00

Mair:

Blue Mountain Park is one of the parks that we went to every summer. We always had a big family Fourth of July, Memorial Day, Labor Day picnic at Blue Mountain Park. It was one of the places where my mom would wake us up at butt-crack of dawn, 5:00 in the morning, and we would go out there with our sleeping bags or our little blanket pallets and just lay on the tables and hold tables. And then Mom and them would come over there by 7:00, 8:00, bringing other food and other stuff to the table. We had to hold it because you had to be that early, because everybody and their mother was there doing the same thing. So we had a system of—since we were the younger ones, we were the anchor weights that would hold table.

And so, one season—this was actually, I want to say about, it might have been 1978. What happened was two dogs got into a fight, and one of the dogs belonged to a family friend, Richard Hopkins. Richard Hopkins' dad and my dad were big labor buddies and whatnot. So, we had the table where we set up, and a lot of the families that were friends with my father, all of us ate and dined and broke bread, so usually a big gathering, about twenty people or so, but a very big gathering of us. And we would all be sitting there and enjoying and what have you.

But anyway the dogs got into a fight. So one was Richard Hopkins Jr.'s son's dog, and a white guy just ran over and just really booted the dog, kicked it. And the dog whelped, and so Richie Jr. jumped up and said, "You kicked my dog," and he jumped on the guy because kicking the dog is like kicking somebody's family.

03-01:51:39

Mair:

And so, a fight broke out, and Richie got the better of the guy. And the guy went away, but then he came back with a bunch of other white men, and then they said the magic word that just lit it up. You start calling Blacks "nigger" in that place, in that space, even though a lot of the park around was white and you still had all that other stuff, but you called the wrong people. You're calling UAW, your World War II vets. You're now flipping the switch. You're calling the boy from Harlem and that crew.

And, like I said, one thing, when that happened, all I just remember was fisticuffs. And my dad and all them, my mom's brothers, Roy and Uncle Warren and all them—in fact, Uncle Warren ran in and tried to break things up. And then a guy hit him with a stick, and it broke his collarbone. And he went down, and when he went down—and Uncle Warren was a very strong guy. He got back up, and he had his arm down, but he had that other arm. And he was dropping them with one, swinging that good arm that he had.

03-01:52:49

Mair:

But naturally, my uncle Roy, my mother's other brother, said, "My brother's hurt," and he jumped in. And Uncle Roy is another big, burly guy. And then, Mr. Clean, Arnie, rolled in. And then it just cleared out, and it was just stuff going on all the way around. And I wasn't innocent. I was up in it as well. Me and my other cousins, we just gathered every rock that we had, because the roads were like all these little rocks. So, it was like the worst time for those people. They picked the wrong place to do battle because we were like little fusiliers. We were launching them things into them.

03-01:53:32

Eardley-Pryor:

What happened at the end of it? How did things resolve?

03-01:53:33

Mair:

At the end of it, I'd say about at least what looked to me like about twenty policemen and the ambulances were carting people from both sides out. But it was a full-on—they shut the park down, and it was a full-on, almost like a little race engagement. But it was on. It was full-on. It was ugly. But again, it was one of those weird little things. Again, the politics of the day, you're just a few years out from the crazy stuff that happened in 1976 with the desegregation that was going on and hitting a lot of schools. So there was already a lot of tension.

1976 was also funny because two indelible things I remember on the front page of the paper—the guy with the American flag stabbing a Black guy in Boston, and Richard Pryor's *Bicentennial Nigger* album, which was the capstone of that, the ugliest, because here was our nation's bicentennial. And here's 200 years of heritage, and heritage of racism. And it was just out in its all three-fifths-of-a-man ugliness.

And it did not stop in '76. It rolled into the Reagan years because, just like Nixon ran on "Law and order," Reagan in 1980 was just coming in on "We're still tired of these people, the welfare queens," still stereotyping our people and our role in America. So, I'd say that was its crescendo. Just like Nixon was the crescendo to the Vietnam War, you had the Reagan crescendo. But it just kind of—after Reagan, things just kind of died down. But, it was one of those really, really weird, interesting times.

03-01:55:05

Mair:

But politically, as a family, we were very political. That whole culture of this standing together, sticking together as a community, defending one another—it's one time where a group of whites who were in the overwhelming majority, when they set upon that little cluster of Black families from Peekskill that day, they went tumbling down the hill. They went rolling out of there. And that just did not happen again.

And, it's kind of weird because I really felt proud of my dad and my family, how we literally stood up in the face of some really vicious racism, a friend's animal getting kicked, and then that friend being attacked, and then a group of whites assaulting him. But my dad's military sense, he marshaled—we were ready. And because his presence was there and all, they were able to push back. But, interesting, nobody was arrested. Uncle Warren and several white men—I think Uncle Warren was the only major African-American casualty that day because he had a broken collarbone. But otherwise in that, probably a few people had to get stitches or whatever.

But, insofar as what they were hauling out of there in ambulances, it wasn't a lot of folks from the Black community that day. It was not like the Paul Robeson Riots. But that day [in 1978], it wasn't bad. But Peekskill had its hot moments. It had its bad moments.

03-01:57:00

Eardley-Pryor:

What was high school like for you? These are family stories.

03-01:57:05

Mair:

Well, high school was great. I was an athlete. I was not like my brothers or my uncles. My uncle George McKenzie was a ConEd [Con Edison] Award winner. ConEd was like the Heisman Trophy of [high school] athletes, and my uncles Walter and George McKenzie were legends in Westchester County. ConEd is the award of athlete amongst athletes. So, these are the guys who were burly. They were what I call your country corn-pone Greenville-Pickens slammers. These were the guys like [William] the Refrigerator Perry in football. These linemen, they just took people out.

And, those years, Peekskill dominated. It was one of the smaller municipalities, but it had these country boys. And you had these country boys because of the segregated housing pattern where this is where only Blacks could settle. But they brought in these boys from the South, and they could play some football and basketball. So that Black migration actually gave Peekskill a secret weapon that other municipalities didn't have. And even though they had Blacks in the other communities, they still weren't as big, burly, and as good as my family and other folks who came in.

03-01:58:19

Eardley-Pryor:

And you played those, too—football, basketball?

03-01:58:21

Mair:

I'll get to it in a second, but I'm just laying out that there was a tradition of sports and athletics. My cousin, Richard Jackson, who went on to become the first African-American mayor ever elected in the state of New York, he was a pretty awesome track star.

In fact, what's really funny is that one of the guys that was on the basketball team with my other uncles, he would become the governor of the state of New York. But he's not Black. He's a Caucasian fellow. And his dad and them, they worked for my uncle, Richard Jackson, out of the war department because it was Governor George Pataki. So, the family, George Pataki, he grew up as, I call it, Navin Johnson. Ever see the movie *The Jerk*? Well, that was George Pataki with my uncle, because that's where he rolled. He rolled with our family, and it was like he would go on—he had that photographic memory—he would go on and do great things at Yale and then come back and make a fortune for himself. But what's really funny is that he grew up very close and integrated in this Black community.

Another local legend out of our community is a guy by the name of Haywood Burns, who would go on to be—he was a Rhodes Scholar, an architect of the South African Constitution. He would actually go over at the end of [apartheid]—he would die in a lorry accident. His car was hit by a truck. Now, there was arguments whether it was intentional, that he was assassinated or not.

03-01:59:46

Eardley-Pryor:

In South Africa?

03-01:59:46

Mair:

In South Africa. But the thing is that, at that time, at the end of apartheid, Reagan and them, they were very pro the other side. And they dragged their feet on pressing, putting pressure on the US against apartheid. But at the leader of the front, [Haywood Burns] was like a Lafayette who went from the United States saying, "This is the time to go in." But it's a rich tradition [from Peekskill]. This is that [political] Left.

03-02:00:07

Eardley-Pryor:

Haywood Burns was from Peekskill?

03-02:00:08

Mair:

He's from Peekskill, New York, yeah, next-door neighbor, by the way, next-door neighbor. So, you've got to understand that hard Left in Peekskill. So, Haywood Burns, he is taking that revolution from our community, that revolution from the United States, the revolution, and now he's at that generation of my older siblings, that Black Power, but he's at that deeper, radical end. And he would go on, like I said, a Rhodes Scholar and a professor.

So, he was like a Lafayette. He just took that with him, and he says, “This is the right time to go in.” And he was part of that delegation that helped South Africa draft its constitution. And he died. He’s a hero, a family friend, a person who, on the riverfront fishing, part of that community. So, when you talk about the people that were there, they were descendents of, like I said, that wave that came out of the South.

But the generation, my generation and the generation of my older brothers and them, these were that fire. They had the fire of building something great. They were passionate. Now, my brothers, they were of that slick and that—into that counter-culture thing. But you also had Haywood Burns and my cousin Richard Jackson, the Blacks who kept it straight.

03-02:01:23

Eardley-Pryor: And you would eventually name the Haywood Burns Environmental Education Center after him?

03-02:01:27

Mair: In honor of him.

03-02:01:31

Eardley-Pryor: Here in Albany?

03-02:01:31

Mair: Here in Albany. That’s how you keep the tradition and the love of those who are your heroes in your communities. You keep their names alive, because they did the righteous thing.

It was kind of funny because when I named it the Haywood Burns Environmental Education Center, George Pataki, who was then governor, the mayor of the city of Albany did not know my relationship with the governor at all because I never talked about it. It was one of the other rules. You never brag about your advantage. You don’t throw up and throw your weight around. It was one of those core organizing codes from Arnold, that you keep your stuff close to the vest. You never put your cards out there.

So, when the thing came up and we named it the Haywood Burns Center, et cetera, what happened was the mayor, when he came up, he sat next to the governor and everything. And he pulled the governor aside like, “Watch out for this guy,” and he was giving him the local mayor—because he figures that Governor Pataki is white, and we’re going to have a white male talk and white mansplain about what these Black guys are.

So Pataki listened to him, nodded and everything else, what have you. And so, once we got to the point where he’s talking, the governor was talking, he’s like, “Aaron, how’s your mom?” And you could see mayor Jerry Jennings’ face go orange or something. It just was like, it didn’t dawn upon

him. And then the governor laid out, “I went to school with Aaron’s uncles and family. We see ourselves as family.”

03-02:03:07

Mair:

That was when the mayor of the city of Albany realized he was just dumping all this inside white privilege noise into another white male. But again, he did not know the audience. And he just totally gave the guy all this intel. So, the guy just let it out in his presentation. And so, and then Governor Pataki let them all know who Haywood Burns was. And again, it was just like another dagger into the heart of an environmental racist who was then the city of Albany’s mayor, who thought he was on some sort of inside track. But it’s really interesting. But yes, Haywood Burns.

The athletic situation was really great. And on that tradition, I became a track athlete and a cross country athlete.

03-02:03:57

Eardley-Pryor:

You were a runner?

03-02:03:58

Mair:

Yes, I was a runner. I lettered all four years in all three seasons. So, I was on the varsity club.

03-02:04:06

Eardley-Pryor:

Wait, say that again. You lettered all four years?

03-02:04:09

Mair:

Yes.

03-02:04:10

Eardley-Pryor:

And every single season?

03-02:04:11

Mair:

Season, in every single season. So you can imagine in my senior year, my big [Peekskill varsity letter] “P” on my back. And there was a group of us who had that, and we were like the Brahma kids. We could walk down the hallway, and you were BMOC: you were Big Men On Campus.

03-02:04:29

Eardley-Pryor:

While still doing your paper route and then working at Sears?

03-02:04:31

Mair:

While doing my paper route and all that other stuff. It was all that Jamaican-Southern-culture hustle. Grandpa really had hustle. When I had the love of my grandfather, when he was up there praising—in fact, my grandfather had another nickname for me. Not only did he tease me about Paperboy, but he called me Roadrunner.

And, another mentor who stepped into my life—because that was not just only my family. There were other people then who could see your promise. They

could see that you didn't have it all, and yet you were still having a hard life. They also knew of your siblings who were not doing so well. But these two men that stepped out of their privileged status into my life at a critical point in time really was a major turning stone, because up until then—

03-02:05:13

Eardley-Pryor: Well, who were these men?

03-02:05:14

Mair:

I will tell you in a second. But up until then, the only big thing for you, in my dad's eyes, if you graduated, you either got a job, any job, or you go into the military. That's the other thing. So there's two big things for my father, getting a job and going into the military. Because his knowledge of beyond that, that was his Mount Olympus. That's his high point. It's his water mark.

So, two men in my life, one is Jack Burns. Jack Burns—John Burns—Irishman, a real saint of Peekskill, a real decent man. He's a just man. He was an attorney. He was a lawyer, also a World War II vet. He is a native. I'm not sure whether he's a native of Peekskill or Verplanck, New York. But either way, his family pretty much grew up in Peekskill since the nineteenth century. I think there's a document. So they're an old Peekskill family.

And, he was one of the people, when my Uncle Richard Jackson got his job at the water department, when [Uncle Richard] would become commissioner, he [Jack Burns] actually sat on the Board, [the] town Board of Supervisors, when they were going to appoint him, because it was purely on merit and qualification. But the big thing for Richard Jackson, he was also a veteran, too. He served in the United States Navy, one of the reasons why I went into the Navy.

03-02:06:33

Mair:

But in short, they wanted to give Richard Jackson the job, but he could not get the house, and he could not get the car. Up until then, every commissioner got a house and a car as part of the perks of their job, on top of their salary in running the entire water supply for the municipality. But because he was African-American, they were going to deny him two of the critical—solely because he was Black. But Jack Burns was the one who intervened and really ripped into them. And I think at the end of the day, the compromise was that he did get the house, but he didn't get the car. But it's that kind of stuff that was very much alive in the community.

But Jack Burns was a person who could not tolerate racism. And he had no problem calling it out. He had no problem calling it out. And can you imagine what it was like in the sixties and seventies to have a guardian angel like that in the community, respected, a town attorney, city attorney, connected in all the politics in the town? And Jack was a juiced man in the Democratic Party. He love Harry Truman. He loved him some Harry Truman. And it was like

Give ‘Em Hell Harry. It was Give ‘Em Hell Jack. And Jack just pulled no punches. Jack was just something else. Jack was the man.

03-02:08:05

Mair:

So, when I came of age in track and cross country, and this was just when the marathons were becoming the big thing, the roadrunner clubs and all that. Peekskill put together its roadrunner event, and Jack was one of the organizers of that. And, it was a very big thing for him to get the boys from the track and cross country team to run in that event. That was a big thing. So, the bicentennial race that began in Peekskill in 1976, when we stepped in, the cross country team—it was perhaps Peekskill’s finest cross country team because up until then, Peekskill’s cross country team was just a dog team. It was like the sport where kids who couldn’t get on any other sport would go to, and it was an easy letter. They really didn’t care whether they placed or drew.

But me, coming from the family I came from, and my friends, a lot of us were working class, but we were competitors. We were sharks. So our legs were in shape because we had these paper routes that literally went ten, twelve-mile paper routes. So, our legs were strong.

And so now, I remember first running my freshman year. I ran in my pants. I didn’t have a pair of shorts. And I didn’t have a decent—I had Converse sneakers, blue jeans, Levi’s, and a T-shirt. That’s what I ran in.

And, my first mentor outside of Jack Burns was Michael Urell. And he saw me, and I ran the 1.5-mile course, and I smoked it. And he says, “Did you cut?” He was looking at his clock and everything, because he’s had past freshman. And I go, “No.” And he said, “Come here.” And at the end of practice, he took me over to the office, and he got me a pair of shorts, and he got me my first pair of blue Nikes. I’ll never forget. He gave me my first pair of running shoes and my shorts and also gave me a pair of Peekskill cross country pants, number 20 on them. I’ll never forget it, crimson and blue, the navy blue, which is a dark. It looks almost like black, but it’s actually deep blue.

03-02:10:00

Mair:

And I was so proud of them, man, that I wore them. And you were only supposed to wear them on cross country meets and days of meets. That’s when you were allowed to wear them. But I was just so proud to have that, man. I would show up in it. It was like my suit. And I was like, I identified. And guys in the varsity team would come up to me and say, “Hey, idiot, it’s not a meet day. What are you doing with that on?” The white boys, they just had to mess with a kid. And I said, “Well, listen, I wanted to wear it.” And they go, “You’re going to get in trouble from Coach.”

And so, Coach, he heard about it, and he pulled me aside and said, “Aaron.” I says, “I just told them,” I says, “I really like them. I’ve never earned anything

like this before.” And he realized that this was a major piece of pride for me. So he actually got me an older uniform. I could wear that, and that became my running sweats. And a lot of other people were upset. They thought he was giving me special treatment. But he just saw that I had promise. There was something there, and that this really meant a lot. But also, I was a poor kid, and he took me under his wing. But he also saw that I ran my—I would do my paper route. I would go and run. I would work out.

03-02:11:05

Mair:

There was a group of us that would run every day. We started out, we got up to five miles a day. And then we were actually, then, running ten miles a day. And then we would do a double split where we’d be doing twenty miles a day, with a ten-mile run in the late afternoon. We had our practice. And so, we would get anywhere from fifteen to twenty miles. And people said, “That’s impossible.” I go, “No, we did that. We did that.” And the morning runs, I would get up and do a five-mile run in the morning. And you just did that. And, you were doing that because it was your competitive edge.

But the long and short of it is that by the time of my sophomore year, so we had the freshman year where the coach flipped us up to JV, and we ran. At that time, if you ran one varsity event you would be eligible for a letter. And so, that was my first letter, and I think he did that as a motivator. And it worked because we got our varsity letter for that fall season, which then I rolled into track. I was destined to earn my points for track and winter track and spring track, which I eventually did.

But what that did set me up was for that summer, in 1976, to really work out every day. And Edwin and I and a group of us would run every single day.

03-02:12:36

Eardley-Pryor:

And ‘76 is an Olympic year, even though it was—

03-02:12:38

Mair:

Oh yeah, Frank Shorter. Frank Shorter was a big icon for us. I was always, in my mind, I was Frank Shorter. Frank Shorter was my hero. He was a marathoner, US marathoner. And any time I ran, people never knew, in my mind I became Frank Shorter. And, how’s that? Other Black kids in that area, you had your Black football athlete. No, I’m running, I’m Frank Shorter. And it was, you’re just one with—just doing that.

And so, it got to the point where people would see you running all around town because we would have these massive loops. And everybody would just know that the group of us were just the runners. And so, that was where the Roadrunner name is, because everybody would just start to notice it, and they would take notice of it.

And the explosion didn’t come until 1977 when we had that fall—coming in, this is our sophomore year—and so, the coach had the time trials. And so,

freshman year, these guys that were juniors and whatnot that were really assholes, that were truly—they were bigoted. You'd be out running, and somebody would yell "nigger" or something. They would just do that, and you just did what you had to do. And, so these were the guys that the coach would always sit aside and meet and have a serious talk. And this was the old varsity starting five.

03-02:13:53

Mair:

One real good guy was Barry Rothfuss, who was really kind of cool. Barry, his father Al Rothfuss, he took a little bit of a shine to us. But he didn't take a shine to us until that '77 because then when we came back off of that summer of really working, and Coach just thought that we did like average kids, [that] we did nothing over summer school.

So we had the time trial that fall, and it's a three-mile course. And Edwin, myself, and a couple of guys that [we] ran with, we all came in between sixteen and seventeen minutes. And it was the first time he ever had—in addition to Barry Rothfuss, who always ran upper fifteen to sixteen minutes, because he was a very great talent. All of a sudden, he had four other athletes who now could complement one of the county's best runners.

And, when he saw us—so he saw Barry coming off the hill, which you always expected. But when he saw Barry coming off the hill, and then within about 100 yards of Barry there was the pack of us, you could see this guy doing a dance. And so, we all came through, and he clocked us in. He goes, "You guys all smashed the record." And Barry says, "They pushed me." So, we pushed Barry so hard that he broke the school record during a practice, a time trial. And we all came in over the record time that was one of Barry's best times.

So, word got out that we were going to be a pretty smoking team that year, and we smoked from then to '79. We were really that competitive. My fastest mile was four minutes and seventeen on the old mile.

03-02:16:00

Eardley-Pryor:

Wow, that's crazy fast.

03-02:16:02

Mair:

Of course it is. And, you had our guys that are all down at that level. Our guys, it was between that lower end, you just had a phenomenal track team. Everything from the middle distance, from the two-mile relay on down, a town with 20,000, a high school about a couple hundred people, we produced a team of quality as if we were a school five times that. But it was all because of that culture, and it just jelled. So we did some very, very decent stuff. So as an athlete, I was a pretty decent athlete. And it was a point of pride.

And from there, you got to the next level. That's when I started learning about college and all that stuff.

03-02:16:53

Eardley-Pryor: Did Jack Burns or Michael Urell, did they have an influence on thinking about college for you as well?

03-02:17:00

Mair: Oh, yeah. Mike was the one that really said, "Aaron, what are you going to do after this? Senior year is coming around. Did you think about college?" Because, what Mike wanted me to do, he wanted me to go into education, and he wanted me to come back. He wanted me to be a schoolteacher. He felt that I had a lot to teach. He became a really decent mentor, and he really got to understand the complex—because he knew about my family. He knew about my brothers, and he knew about that whole scene. And he says, "You're just not them. You're something special, and we've got to protect you."

And I know that he's had conversations with Al Rothfuss, and they actually, Old Man Al, they literally became that wall, that bubble, that says, "No, this kid's got to make it," this kid—not just me. Me, Edwin, there's a whole group of us. And he says, "Listen, here's what you're going to need. Here's where you're at." At that time, I was not taking the right mix of courses, and so in my junior and senior year I had to make up for two years' worth of Regents that I did not take in ninth and tenth grade.

03-02:18:14

Mair: So I remember, it's one of the funniest things, was that I had to take the tenth grade social studies Regents, and I had a non-Regents course. And so, I had to go and sit and do it. Because the rule was you did not have to take Regents courses to take the Regents, but you had to pass the Regents itself. So, armed with nothing but those little study guides, man, I ended up getting, like, an 87 on the social studies Regents.

And this guy, Dean Teitelbaum, who was the tenth grade Regents guy who also proctored the exam, and Dean was one of those really elitist snobs. But he, in his mind, had his idea who the good students were. So the fact that there was this non-Regents kid coming in to take the Regents, you could see that, "What are you doing here?" kind of look the teacher gives you. And you go in, and you get this.

I remember him running down the hall and said to Mike Urell, he said, "Did you see this? Did you read this?" And he goes, "How the hell did he do this? This guy is sitting in merits class with all the slags. How does a sweathog end up smoking the Regents?" And so, he came up to me as if I was all of a sudden this hidden genius that was misclassified.

03-02:19:44

Mair: But the benefit of it is that it had the impact on the teacher's conference room. And from that junior year on with teachers totally it was like a 180 in how I was treated, because clearly they go, "No, he has the talent. He has the stuff." And so then I went to biology honors and all these other classes, these AP

classes. And you just then took the SAT, and you get lucky, and I ended up getting into the State University of New York at Binghamton.

03-02:20:14

Eardley-Pryor: Which is a pretty—it's one of the premier—

03-02:20:17

Mair: Of the SUNY schools, in its day, it was ranked as the Harvard of the SUNY schools.

03-02:20:24

Eardley-Pryor: It's part of the Public Ivies.

03-02:20:26

Mair: SUNY Binghamton, in its day, was the top-ranked SUNY school. And the only school I think tougher was the SUNY Maritime Academy, which is almost an all-engineering curriculum, which they try to emulate a West Point type of curriculum. But SUNY Binghamton itself, as a university, it was one of the better universities to get into.

And, there's a little tragic piece to that because Mike Urell and them, they, A, were my mentors. They looked out. And they were the fathers who could give me the values and the norms that my father could not give me. And Jack Burns, he had always what I call a circle of young men and women that he looked out for. And to be amongst that group—and Jack, when you dealt with Jack, he was like a peer. He never lectured down to you. He was not like my dad.

Jack was genuinely interested in my mind and my heart. Jack had a deep respect and appreciation in me because he would just say, "What are you thinking?" He just cared about my vision. How was I interpreting reality? What was driving? What was the things that were inspiring me? Jack would push me into thinking, into speculative thought, just theoretical, just developing your notion of the theory of self. Jack was the guy that pushed you in that space.

03-02:21:53

Mair: And the term "intellectual," he was the guy that gave me that term and to think beyond eating, sleeping, feeding myself and worrying about a job, which is the typical blue-collar lifecycle. So, he specifically shattered that bubble of the next-generation and next-line blue-collar kid that may work at General Motors or a factory. He shattered that, and "no, you have to do this." And, Mike Urell just complemented on top.

And then they all ran along with this guy called—I believe I might have screwed up his name, but Vincent Clark, who was the audio-visual as well as the social studies teacher. And Vinnie Clark, he gave me a—it was a Super 8 [movie camera]. So, I'm walking around, so I made one of the worst movies in creation. It was me and David Lawter, another childhood friend of mine

from middle school. We hung like butter and glue. We just stuck together. David Lawter, he and I became very fast friends in middle school, and we stayed together to this day. We're lifelong friends. He married one of Jack's daughters. I was upset because I wanted to marry Martha, but Martha ended up running off with David's brother, Jimmy Lawter—her loss. But, the long and short of it is that he married Jack's daughter. But we all had this very, very fascinating circle.

And like I said, Jack poured a lot of his intellectual pushing and analytical thinking. So he took Dad's class analysis, and with Jack you got a legal structural analysis. You got the Constitution. You got the law. "Aaron, this is what you've got to look at."

03-02:23:48

Eardley-Pryor: So, he opened up your world to the role that policy and legislation could play.

03-02:23:52

Mair: He rolled up, so the point in which I took that Regents, which I really got serious and really cared about the Constitution and really cared about the actors, and then other little pieces, because he's the one that says, "Yes, the Fort Hill, these were Black Revolutionary [War] soldiers up over here in Fort Hill."

03-02:24:08

Eardley-Pryor: That came from Jack Burns?

03-02:24:09

Mair: Well, he's the one that pointed out that there was a Black regiment and also that the capture of the traitor with regards to West Point, this was where—

03-02:24:23

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, Benedict Arnold?

03-02:24:24

Mair: Yes. You know. So the British spy that was escaping through Peekskill, I believe two of the Tories were actually from Peekskill. And the ship that was coming to pick him up, it was an African-American, an ancestor of the Moser family, that fired the cannon that, I think, was the Vulture—whatever the name of the ship was. But anyway, it was this guy from Peekskill that fired the cannon. In fact, that cannon was with the family. It sits right now in front of the Peekskill Museum. That scared off the Vulture, which ultimately led to this guy's capture, which led to the exposure of Benedict Arnold's plan.

So, this was very much part of Jack. Jack took upon his place and space like my grandfather, John Paul, and also just hanging out with the family in South Carolina. He took up on that place and space of storyteller. But it wasn't from just a family [perspective], but from how great this nation is, and how great the freedoms and these liberties are, and why these laws mean certain things, the significance of Alexander Hamilton.

So, the point where it went from this abstract noise of a Charlie Brown teacher episode, where someone's going wah-wah-wah in your head, to you actually hear a voice and you actually hear clear concepts and you actually see how these things are strung together. And then Jack pointing out, "This is what they tried to do to your uncle." And then he's now putting in this connection. This is where racism comes from. This is the three-fifths.

03-02:25:49

Mair:

So, he's giving me specific constitutional arguments on how society was structured in that this is bullcrap. "Here's why we have laws, and this is how you fight it. And this is why you should be going on to higher education, because you can absolutely change things. A kid like you, your energy, your brilliance," he says, "You have all the raw material to do something decent." It's one of those things that he pushed me on.

I would say, while Dad and them gave me that raw working-class analysis, the intellectual framework and construct and making of that scholarly, analytical approach, that's where Jack Burns steps in. Jack Burns becomes the father that any middle-class or upper-class kid should have. Jack was a surrogate parent who knew exactly what he was doing. And he did that for a number of young men and women, George Pataki being amongst them. I found that out much later, but he was that kind of man who could shape the minds of the future next generation, but one that can ground it so that you can appreciate a lot of the analytical constructs. And then things start to fall into place in big ways.

03-02:27:17

Eardley-Pryor:

Well, that's a perfect place to pause before we can move on to the next big place of falling into place and following that intellectual path at Binghamton. So, we'll pick up from there. Thanks, Aaron.

03-02:27:28

Mair:

Thank you.

Interview 4: November 14, 2018

04-00:00:01

Eardley-Pryor: We're here for our fourth interview session with Aaron Mair's oral history as a part of the Sierra Club Oral History Project at UC Berkeley. I am Roger Eardley-Pryor. Today is Wednesday, November 14th [2018]. Today we are at the Sierra Club Atlantic chapter's headquarters in Arbor Hill, Albany, New York.

Aaron, last time you and I were speaking, we spoke about how Jack [Burns] and Mike [Urell] helped mentor you and opened up doors of opportunity that you then took and seized for yourself, bringing you to university. Can you take the story forward from there?

04-00:00:33

Mair:

Sure. Well, there's a couple of quick steps [to discuss first] because not only did they provide the opportunity to say that there's this other place that I should be at, but also that I was worthy, that I was smart enough. They gave me a window on the path, and what I needed to do academically in high school to try to remedially catch up. Because they were like, they said, "Listen, you are university material. But there's a lot of things that, had you had the parental advice, you would have gotten these things."

And this is that classic argument of nature versus nurture, where your environment puts you in. And again, it wasn't until college that you really see the roots of deep discrimination, basically, where your economics can predict your SAT score. And most working-class people, regardless of color, don't understand that. It took these education professionals and this attorney to break that down to me. But they also gave me—their intervention was just strategic enough in my senior year. I had to pretty much do what I should have been doing since my freshman year just to get what they call college prep. And so, that was one critical piece. And then, applying for college.

But during that period of 1979, where I was just assimilating and trying to be this super-sponge so I could be qualified to go to a college, that's when I met Maria. She was an immigrant from Colombia, South America. And, she was cute as a button.

04-00:02:04

Eardley-Pryor: What's Maria's full name?

04-00:02:05

Mair:

Maria Del Socorro Pacheco Fuentes. I always loved Hispanic names because they were, like, a mile long and you said them very fast. And for a precocious kid in high school who was a prankster, I would just literally mess with her name. And my childhood best friend, Edwin Garcia, whose family is from Puerto Rico—an old-time Peekskill family, and also his brothers went to school with my older brothers—he and I were like Mutt and Jeff, from track

and cross country. I told you how we would run. He was also a paperboy as well, I guess a newsie.

But, he already had siblings who were already in college. His father, like my father, were working class. But he had an older set of brothers, who unlike my brothers, actually went to college, went to good schools, already were accountants working for big firms. So, they basically became the surrogate mentors on what their brothers should have. So, Edwin had that framework that he would be able to take the Regents [exam], because he knew why he was taking Regents courses. He knew all those things. Me, going to high school was just going to high school. I was a typical blue-collar kid. But he was a blue-collar [kid] with white-collar brothers who basically stepped in and filled that gap.

04-00:03:21

Eardley-Pryor: So, Edwin and you were the ones that were really pushing, making the running happen? You were pushing that field?

04-00:03:26

Mair: We were pushing each other. We were dear friends and frenemies. We were guys who really liked each other's company. We were the guys in high school, your first drink that you had, the first mischief that you had.

And David Lawter, my other childhood friend who married one of Jack Burns' daughters, was also with us. And it was kind of weird because I was always brokering the friendship with David and Edwin because David did not run. He tried, but he had these issues with his knees that never allowed [him] to run. He had a deformity with one of his kneecaps, so he was one of those people that he would develop arthritis because it was rubbing wrong. But he would always hang out and watch me run, and I think that that always was really cool about how close we were. And he also was a paperboy. And, because David—at that time, long hair was the thing. So, if anybody seen Edgar and Jonny Winter's Groups—speaking of Edgar and Johnny Winter, David was truly an artist. He was very talented. I just wish I could do what he could do with pen and ink. He would do what I would call a black-and-white photo with pen and ink. Again, another dear lifelong friend.

His mother, by the way, thought that I was going to lead him down the road of perdition and get him into all sorts of tricky things and substances. Like, "I think Aaron smokes weed." And she goes, "I'm worried about David," because I would try to get him to go on campouts with us and other things like that.

04-00:04:55

Eardley-Pryor: Was David white?

04-00:04:56

Mair: David's white. David is Irish, David Lawter. And his mother, single parent, raised by a single parent. His parents were divorced. Also, both his parents were World War II vets.

04-00:05:09

Eardley-Pryor: And David's mother was concerned about her son hanging out with a Black man?

04-00:05:12

Mair: Yeah, because I was a character. Track runner, extrovert, doing a lot of things—high-energy kid. And Dave was this really quiet, intense choirboy. He was a typical Catholic choirboy. He went to the Assumption Church. But then in middle school, that's when he came over to the public schools. He went from—because the Catholic Church did not have a high school, or the high schools were private and you had to pay. His mother and them could not pay to send them to—the nearest, I think, was JFK Cross River, which was our phenomenal cross country rivals.

But anyway, David was one of those close friends. And again, he and Edwin were the guys that I went out and had my first sip of alcohol with, my first smoke of a cigarette, my first smoke of marijuana with. We were that typical bunch of guys. And they were just really great young men. But it was really funny because it wasn't me that would lead him that way, because David's cousins were the ones that actually always carried the weed. These were the kids from Connecticut. They were decent, well-heeled backgrounds. And so, it was always those quiet ones that actually brought the trouble, not the noisy kids like me and Edwin.

04-00:06:34

Mair: So, Edwin and I, what's really important about this, because there was a bilingual program in which all the Hispanic kids who were immigrants when they came in, this is where they were all concentrated, in one classroom. And, a lot of kids would pick on them because they were different. They did not speak English. And, this was at that particular point in time where there was that other level of chauvinism and intolerance which really rubbed me wrong because, again, of the intolerance of just dealing with race in that area. So you were a little bit more sensitive, too. I could not understand why my buddy Edwin, who was Puerto Rican, also bought into really ridiculing and harassing the kids in the bilingual program. I would tell him like, "Hey dude, knock it off."

But I really became interested when this very, very attractive young woman came. And I was smitten. They will tell you love will make you do all sorts of crazy things. I had to get to know her. That meant I had to become interested in this bilingual program. How could I become an aide? Can I clean the erasers? What can I do?

And the lady that ran the program was Jenny Vazquez. And Mr. Clark, who had the video thing classroom—because this was one of those extracurricular activities I had to engage in [for] when I put [it] to my résumé, when I applied to college. So David and I had to make a film, so we were just right near Jenny Vazquez. So, I would always slip over there and just mess around and hang out. So while I was supposed to be doing A, I was actually loitering around trying to find out who that beautiful young lady was.

04-00:08:17

Mair:

And so, eventually I got to know Mrs. Vazquez. She always knew of me. She knew I was a little bit of a troublemaker. And she swore to the day she passed, God rest her soul, that I was actually interested in her daughter, Venus, who's a very beautiful young girl. But I was absolutely not interested in Venus. And, it's one of those things where I just didn't think Venus was that bright, to be quite honest with you. I was one of those guys that it was not enough to be beautiful. You had to be smart.

And, so I was a little bit of a—it's kind of funny. Some kid that's finding his new intellectual horizons but then becoming quickly an intellectual snob. It's like, "Really, Aaron?" But at that point in time, all the seniors were talking about college and where they're going to go. I was talking about college, but not even having a clue what college was. I was talking about an experience that I knew nothing about, which is really kind of fascinating. Be it as it may, being competitive with my friends and wanting to at least be conversant as to that next step in life, and that we were all going to be doing this thing together.

But while it was going on, I finally got to get into Mrs. Vazquez's cast and say, "Hey, is there anything [where] I can help?" She figured I was sweet on Maria Pacheco, but I think she was trying to push her daughter. "But you really like Venus, don't you?" I go, "No, I like Maria."

04-00:09:38

Mair:

And she goes, "But she doesn't speak English that well." I go, "I can help her. I can tutor her. I can do all these things." And so I volunteered to be a tutor, a peer program tutor for the bilingual class. I didn't have a lick of the things that—when you become infatuated as a young guy, you just do stupid stuff. And I was really not like the Napoleon Dynamite type of nerd, but it was really that kind of weird thing going down.

It was only because I was a respected varsity athlete, and I was also a good hangout buddy, that the guys, they knew I was trying to see someone. So they really didn't give me that much guff because, again, this was a picked-on population. But also my presence there kind of made a lot of those guys step back on harassing the bilingual program. So, it's kind of funny that one of the benefits of me being a pure tutor at the bilingual program, it took a lot of the edge off of teenagers being bullies that would harass this population. It's like,

“Oh, Aaron’s over. He’ll snap.” So, it also became like a protection racket. So, me being there and hanging out, it’s just like dudes would come by, looking in and smirking. I’d be like, “What?” So, it was this cool thing.

04-00:11:08

Mair:

And peacocking, I guess that’s what they call it. It was also showing off to Maria, “Hey, I’m a cool guy.” So, she couldn’t care a lick. She just thought I was an idiot. She read my number a mile away. And it’s like, “Dude, I got so much going on in my life. You don’t have a clue.” And again, I was being oblivious and what have you. But the long and short of it is I was just trying.

There was a play that year, and she was a year behind me. She was a junior, and I was a senior, so I just knew I had to move fast. So I signed up for this Puerto Rico Day play so that I could still be relevant and show that I was down with Hispanic culture. I was a total poseur.

04-00:11:47

Eardley-Pryor:

Did she even identify, being Columbian, with the Puerto Rican function?

04-00:11:50

Mair:

This is the other thing. You talk about the chauvinism of American culture. We tend to think that everybody who’s Hispanic is all in that bucket that was created for them. And what was really hilarious and ignorant and stupid is that back then, you could say speak Spanish or speak Puerto Rican because to American gringos, the idiocy of our culture and the racism of our culture, we just conflate that anything that spoke Spanish was either Ricky Ricardo, Puerto Rico or speaking Spanish. And so, you just ignorantly interchanged those terms not realizing how culturally oppressive you were and ignorant you were in doing that.

04-00:12:35

Eardley-Pryor:

So, what happened with this play?

04-00:12:36

Mair:

So in short, I actually ended up having a speaking role, a singing role, and a dancing role. And I was as a slave on the island of Borinque. And she was one of the natives who were captured by Christopher Columbus, because Christopher Columbus was notorious for massacring and butchering the natives. So here I stepped into this play because I was fascinated with this girl. And I ended up getting this whole dose of colonial Imperial culture and literally murder. That was my immersion into what Howard Zinn would talk about in [*A People's History of the United States*]. And I’m right in the middle of this thing.

So here I’m having this weird class-cultural-enrichment at a deepest level. So my mind’s blown. My heart is going over here after this woman. And I went from that acting and saying, “I’ve really got to hang out here and look cool and tough because I like this girl, so therefore I’ve got to protect this space

and make her look cool.” And so the peer pressure, where they would normally harass these kids, I was there in that space.

But then after this play, man, I wanted to kill anybody who—it’s like, do you people know? I walked out of that space saying, “There’s these Taíno Indians, man. They were massacred by Christopher Columbus.” Again, I did okay on the social studies exam in the Regents. And all of a sudden here I’ve gotten this deeper—so there’s this other layer of learning about colonialism and racism. And this is all because I’m pursuing this girl. And so my mind is just doing all sorts of crazy things. But ultimately, the long and short of it is that the play was over. We had that dinner, and we had that moment.

04-00:14:34

Eardley-Pryor: There was dinner after the play?

04-00:14:35

Mair: Yeah. It was the celebration, because the whole weekend you had the play. There was all these preps and practices for the play, and I was always being an idiot at the play. There was this scene where we had to do the dance, and we had to dance with the native girls. And so, I would not let her go. We would keep spinning, and she was like, “Stop it. Stop it. This is serious.” She was trying to get me to be serious and focused, because Latin Americans are very much aware of oppression and imperialism. They get this early on. We’re just totally Yankee, ignorant.

So I’m up there goofing off at this thing, and I’m really catching how deep this was. So, her pushing me to be serious, helping me center and helping me focus on what’s happening, so all these things were going on. When I finally got it, man, I aced my roles. I aced the dance. And in the end, it’s one of those things like, “Yeah, chump, you got it. And I know where you were, but I know where you are right now.” So, we actually sat down at that dinner, the post-production dinner, and she held my hand. And then, I was like, “Wow, I’m in love.”

And so, I did the next dumb thing that, I thought, killed the relationship. I learned about this trick in science where they did this little thing, how if you had fire in the vacuum, it could pull water up inside of a cup. So you have to put the water down, and you had the candle in the middle, and you put the cup over top of it. And I did that in the middle of the table. I can’t remember. Somehow, what ended up happening is I ended up setting the table on fire.

04-00:16:19

Mair: And she was calling me “Stupido, you idiot.” Everybody’s throwing water on this damn thing, and that was—so I went from holding her hand to her calling me stupido. And that was the last thing that we did as our thing. It did not progress anymore beyond it. But that was my Maria moment. And, it was intense. It was enlightening. It was conscience building. And, I was a screw-

up. But, the long and short of it was that now I had to focus on serious things like really getting into college.

And so, there was the application process. I got my applications in. Plattsburg, SUNY Albany, because I had a friend—Edwin Garcia went to SUNY Albany. Another friend went to Plattsburg. Another friend went to Adelphi. I applied to Manhattan College and SUNY Binghamton. Adelphi and Manhattan came through. I just didn't have the money. That was the other thing that I did not know about. I just figured college was like high school. You get accepted, and you go. There's this whole thing about a ton of cash.

So then I realized that there's this other layer—that my economic status now posed a barrier, so I had to get the financial aid. And, my uncle Lee Johnson, Johnny Boy, who died from a heroin overdose, his father was the head of the community action program in Peekskill. And so, they all rallied around and, through phone calls and what have you, they managed to get a hold of the EOP program. Somebody had access to the Educational Opportunity Program at SUNY, which basically gave you enriched grants and scholarships. You still had to work, but you basically were covered financially. So, I ended up in the transitional year program at the State University of New York at Binghamton, which helped me finance. So I got the acceptance letter. I got my financial commitment. So, I already knew that I was going to go to college.

04-00:18:21

Eardley-Pryor: What were you feeling?

04-00:18:22

Mair: I was on cloud nine. I was working through my head and rehearsing through my head, "How do I tell Dad? How do I tell Jack? How do I tell Michael?" And, that was the biggest thing.

04-00:18:35

Eardley-Pryor: These are your three male [role] models.

04-00:18:37

Mair: These were the men that were going to—so, I saw Mike Urell. I had my college letter. I brought it to Mike, man, and he just hugged me, man. And he even signed my high school yearbook, "Peekskill needs caring people. And I really hope you consider coming back." He really, to the end, wanted to drive home, "You should be a teacher. You should be coming back. We need men like you to motivate and pull out others. You walked a special path."

I showed it to Jack, and Jack cried. He cried. Jack crying made me cry. It was guys like that that made you realize it's okay to cry. My father was the opposite. You don't cry. My father was one of those men that, you suck it up. Manhood was you holding it in. And so, having a man that could let it out, and I let it out, and we hugged. And, when I say he hugged me, I mean he hugged me like a father, that real approval kind. And it meant the world to me,

because if I can make a man who's an attorney, who cared about the community, who was there for my uncles and all the others and people that he mentored—it was deep, heartfelt, unpretentious. “You did this. You did this, and you're special.” And he just said, “You're one of the brightest people and intelligent.” He goes, “You're raw intelligence is”—and he was in awe of something that I just did not see. And I still don't see it. But in short, it meant the world.

So, the next thing was I had to now tell my dad. And I figured I'd let it slide until the weekend. And what really happened was, that weekend—because Father knew I was going to be graduating and whatnot. And for my dad, I did not understand how my graduation was going to hit him. I did not pay attention to my older brothers, in that they stayed around, and what that meant to my father.

[A portion of this interview has been sealed until 2045.]

04-00:25:42

Mair:

I went running. I went running, doing what I did to calm myself down. I literally went and did a five-mile run just to just get it out of my system.

I came back, and the house was just quiet. And there was my brother Emerson, looking like a raccoon because he had the two black eyes, and they both were closed. And, my mother went from protecting me from Emerson to when I got to the house, she said, “I want to talk to you, young man. You don't hurt your brother like this.” And now it's totally reverse of her giving me the lecture. Now she felt that Emerson now needed protection. I go, “Mom, that's not me, what happened.”

My father was upset because, next to Dickie, he thought Emerson was going to be the next little tough guy, because my father was into tough guys. And I was too much of the punk in his eye, running track and all that, the girlie sports, not football or basketball, not being macho. So, my dad was really upset, and “You're going to be graduating soon. You need to get yourself a job, and you're going to pay rent.” And my father started riding down a litany of what you're going to do, and “If you don't like it, and if you don't like my rules, you can get out the house.”

04-00:26:53

Mair:

I said, “You know what, Dad? I will get out your house.” My dad said, “No, you can get out right now,” because my dad thought that—because that was the thing that scared my other brothers and siblings into shape. I said, “Look, I just need a favor.” I says, “If y'all can spot me through the end of July,” I said, “that would be helpful.” And my mother's looking at me. I said, “I got accepted into college,” and I said, “So I won't be here.” I said, “I'm out. I'm gone.” And my father's like, “What? What?” And I gave him the acceptance letter. That's how he found out that I was going out the door.

And it was like a—there's a movie called Cooley High, and it literally was like that moment where you knew you had to get out of that space because you just were not going to make it if you stayed around. I just did not want to become like my brothers. I wanted to be away. I just now knew that there was a higher plan that I could get to. And I just could not do that living at home, commuting from home. And just, I had to get away from that culture. I literally had to have that cultural break. And that admission letter to Binghamton was that, as they say, that beautiful ladder out. I seized it, and I left.

So after graduation, my mom was very proud. She was telling all of her friends about it. And she drove me to college. It was the biggest—I was her first child, her first baby child, to go to college. And my father's like, "You're going to be a college boy." It was a big thing for him to reach into his pocket. And he counted me off a yard. And counting a kid off a yard's a big thing. A yard is a hundred bucks. So he gave me a hundred bucks, and he's like, "Just, good luck," because he didn't know what to tell me. But a hundred dollars and a handshake from him, it was all right.

04-00:28:55

Mair:

But I never knew, like I said, how much he cared or how much it mattered until a little bit later. And Jack and those was, "Your father talks about you all the time, and he's really proud of you." Honestly, I would have never known because he never had the courage to tell me that to my face. He would actually tell other people, his friends, his drinking buddies, everybody. When I would come home on the college breaks, that was that feedback.

So I went off to State University of New York at Binghamton the fall of '79. And I was there on their track team and their cross-country team, and that was my initial two years. And I had to drop off the track and cross-country team while there because of the academics. I had to do the work, and I had to do the academics, and plus run track. And so, it was a whole lot, and something had to give, because I literally was sleeping in class.

And so, in 1980, on one of those things when you're coming home to visit, sophomore year, they ask you to come back to your high school to talk about the colleges and whatnot. And that's when I saw Maria again, in the audience. And it was one of those things. "Hey, Maria, how are you doing? Let's grab lunch or something like that." She goes, "Yeah." I says, "Have dinner?" and did the old cornball lunch-to-dinner. And she said yeah. And then I said, "Well, great." I said, "Is there something," because there was some event that was coming up. It was a basketball game that weekend. So, I asked her to dinner after basketball, and we can hang out with some of her friends.

And so I pulled a fast one, in short, so she took the dinner. She thought her friends would be able to come. I go, "Let's forget them," and I had my car. We went off to dinner and what have you. And I told her, I says, "Why won't

you come to Binghamton?" I gave her the personal pitch and personal tour of Binghamton.

04-00:30:57

Farrell:

Was she thinking about college afterwards, too?

04-00:30:59

Mair:

She actually was thinking about going into the Army. She had actually already signed a letter of commitment to go to the United States Army because she was thinking about getting her mother here. She was trying to earn the money and all the things that she thought that would be good paths of citizenship for her mother. I did not know about their immigration status and what have you. So in that walking conversation, she kind of let me into her world and what she was going through, that she was living with an aunt, and they had to work to earn the money. Half of her two siblings plus her dad were still in Colombia.

And so, the expectation is that she would go into the Army, get a job and pay for the paperwork. That was the pathway that she was on. I said, "You're too smart for this." I said, "No." I gave her that same spiel that Jack and Mike Urell gave me and says, "You're wasting your talent." And I helped her work on her college—because she did not apply—so I helped her work on her college paperwork, and I personally walked it through over at Binghamton. She eventually got accepted, and she came to Binghamton. And that was transforming her world.

04-00:32:05

Eardley-Pryor:

And yours.

04-00:32:06

Mair:

And mine. Clearly, I had a self-interest. It was the long game. I was a long-distance runner, so I was going to put in a long game. And the long and short of it is that we got to the college, and like I said, we were really close.

A lot of people—like I said, she was a very beautiful woman. A lot of guys, it was then fending off fellow wolves to competitors. And then you realize that you just had to be on your game and being sharp and what have you. And, everything from young men of means and families who had—better, well-heeled than I am, both Hispanic and Black and white.

And what she was was loyal. To her, it was that—before anything—was that she saw me doing all these things. And so, we became very, very close friends, very good friends, and working on that next level. Long and short of it, in 1984, we decided at our senior year, when we graduated, we'd get married. And so upon graduation, shortly after graduation, we got married. So, we would at least do the four years and see whether it worked out and whether it stabilized. And we just, over those years, between working in summers and

whatnot and saving money. We had that parallel interest. And that's what we did.

04-00:33:40

Eardley-Pryor: Did y'all go back to Peekskill for summers?

04-00:33:43

Mair: We went back to Peekskill for summers. We would stay at my mom's house. That would be the place to crash and stay while we worked. And, my mom and them were pretty cool about letting us keep our money, so it just made the year. That extra five grand that you could earn, it saved you. Instead of working the full twenty hours of work study, now I can work down to ten hours, which was a big deal. So, that's what we did.

So, '84 we graduated, and my mom and them thought I got her pregnant or something, because she felt that, "Why are you getting married?" They all saw it as an interference and what have you. It wasn't until a year on that my mother goes, "So, when am I going to be a grandmother? What's going on here?" I go, "No." She goes, "Maria's not pregnant?" I go, "No." And then she went to hit me in the head with a pillow or something, or a pot or something. "What? You got married?" I go, "Well, Mom, you ain't got to get pregnant to get married." She was like "You're too"—I said, "Mom, if she got [pregnant] I just don't want to be having an out-of-wedlock child or all that." She goes—so it was like—

04-00:35:01

Eardley-Pryor: Wait, so did y'all get married during college or after?

04-00:35:03

Mair: No, we got married our senior year. We completed our degrees. And so it was basically, I want to say, about—

04-00:35:22

Eardley-Pryor: Sometime in the early eighties?

04-00:35:23

Mair: Yeah. It was '84, I think, yeah. So, she got married, and then the twelve-month window went by where she didn't have a child. That's when everybody thought we were nuts. But immediately, shortly after, we had Marjana.

04-00:35:38

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, you guys did get pregnant right away?

04-00:35:39

Mair: Yeah. So, we did have Marjana, and that's when I had to get work. I had to worry about—

04-00:35:46

Eardley-Pryor: Take me back to some of the college experience. What were you studying? You had this intellectual opening just before college. What happened during college?

04-00:35:53

Mair: During college, one of the big things—the people I mentored under was a fellow by the name of James Geschwender, who was a social stratification theorist. James Petras, who was a strong leftist radical thinker.

04-00:36:23

Eardley-Pryor: Like the ilk of your father, like from that labor, radical—

04-00:36:28

Mair: Jim Petras was an intellectual. My father was a labor guy. He's just strictly blue collar. These guys were probably—

04-00:36:35

Eardley-Pryor: Scholars?

04-00:36:35

Mair: —second or third generation. These were PhDs. These were professors. And so, when I got to school, I got involved in a number of the radical groups—I immediately gravitated after my first series of Sociology 101 and social stratification, and my history courses on race relations. I really wanted to deconstruct my experiences. So I had to go to college to really get that education. The stuff that you should have gotten in high school, unfortunately you have to go to college to get. So, in my opinion, it would save a lot of people of color a lot of pressure and stress to give that stuff in high school rather than waiting to offload to college.

I can understand why they do it that way, because the races don't ever want to teach their own children how stratified society is by race. And so, you just teach the fundamental American Civics 101, American History, Civil War, what have you. You don't do the, as I call it, the economic analysis—that they actually are worried about people getting jobs, and so therefore we're going to keep them this way. And the people and the theories behind it, you don't really get into that strong racial stratification and socioeconomic stratification until college. And that's what those early political sciences and those early history classes and those early sociology classes really get into.

04-00:38:01

Eardley-Pryor: And being there encouraged you to get active?

04-00:38:04

Mair: Yeah. Being in an academic environment where you're there to think, from sunrise to sunset you're writing papers, you're engaged in—now you're engaging in other young intellectuals, and you're engaging in a debate. I'm going to pause right here because I think I heard a knock.

04-00:38:20

Eardley-Pryor: That's great.

(break in audio)

04-00:38:22

Eardley-Pryor: Okay, Aaron, you were talking about your academic awakening in college.

04-00:38:26

Mair: Yeah. The individuals, like I mentioned, James Petras—Jim Petras and James Geschwend are the Jims and James. So, that's one of the cool things. But then there was another guy, John McClendon. And, John McClendon, at that time, was a doctoral student. And, he was in the faculty of both the sociology and history departments. He was a W.E.B. Du Bois scholar. And so, he was really into race and class consciousness and what they call the dialectical method. So, he was basically using Marxian theory of class analysis to explain African-American movements in the United States.

And, when he and I came together, not only did we become very close friends, but a mentor-mentee relationship happened. And, that was where a lot of my deep, radical consciousness was guided—"You have to read this." And so, I had a mentor who went from not only someone that you're expressing and articulating and regurgitating what you're learning, but now translating it into real-world realities and placing yourself in these constructs, you have someone who actually takes it to that next level of: you, class analysis, self, your family, and putting it into that fabric of American history.

So, this is where my life and my sense of awareness of family and really understanding my father and my mother and overall dynamic that I was angry about—because as a child you're coming up from the psycho-social structural comfort of family dynamics, and that of a father and a mother provider and the child dependent. You're still at the teat of your parents. And you're in the shelter of their home. And even though you're having all your experiences in high school and education, there's still a protective barrier that you're just nothing.

04-00:40:44

Eardley-Pryor: You're in that world.

04-00:40:45

Mair: You're in their world, and you really don't know. And, you step into a university environment, so you're breaking from that bubble of security, and you're stepping into a new world where you're going to have to think and provide for yourself, but more importantly use your intellectual development and your intellectual capital now to start to provide. And that's where I even got the term "intellectual capital" from, because I then learned that there are all forms of capital, and capital can manifest itself in money, assets, property.

And one of the things that John stressed the most, John McClendon, was that the most important capital that you have is intellectual capital. And he says, “And here’s the trick that immigrants usually hit Black people with.” They always talk about how they come here penniless and they make something of themselves, and they juxtapose that against Black people who’ve been here all along, and it reinforces the myth that Blacks are lazy and don’t do nothing or don’t contribute.

John says, “Listen, when an individual comes over penniless at the end of World War II, an immigrant forced out of his nation, but he’s a medical doctor, he’s a physicist, he has still intellectual capital. So, yes, he can come here penniless, but it doesn’t take him long to integrate himself into academia and immediately take a role, going from poverty right into the echelons of the middle class and upper middle class. I learned the term “bourgeoisie” and “petit bourgeoisie”. And I had never connected those dots.

And then, having him as a guide to break these things down—that these are also tricks and traps that are used to divide the underclass and oppress the underclass, whereby a person can come in from the outside as a new immigrant and become part of the oppressive class and feel self-righteous because they came in without monetary capital, but discounting all other forms of capital. And he’s saying capital is a critical environmental variable. And these were just mind-blowing concepts because when we talk about nurture versus nature and how you’re raised, and that intellectual capital, that all forms of capital go into the ability to raise somebody and raise them well, and how people are born into that wealth. So they get to skip all these other layers. And if your family’s stuck at these rungs, these people will lord over.

04-00:43:03

Mair:

So, having this individual as a dear friend and guide, he really helped take a lot of the concepts that were really swirling in my academic training and helped make them real, helped me break them down. And he knew that I had the deficits of coming in missing some courses, but he became a guide of what courses to take, what writings I need to do, and how I need to write—different styles of writing, different voices, things that I should have learned in high school, but because I was a working-class kid. You’re just like, what?!

04-00:43:42

Eardley-Pryor:

I think college is where most of that learning happens for everyone [who has the chance to go].

04-00:43:45

Mair:

You learn all these things. You learn about debate. Kids I used to laugh at and bully in the debate club, now I see why they ended up coming out and marrying and being wealthy, because that debate actually serves them at that next platform. And I see how all these other clubs that I thought were silly as a kid in high school actually advantage and reinforce advantage. And so, it

was these profound insights that I really start to learn about my place in the world.

And I went from feeling like I was on top of the world to feeling really, really small. And that's what John says. "You're having a clash and a crisis of consciousness." He says, "You're becoming awake. You're learning really where you are." He said, "But don't let that take you over. Don't let that consume you."

04-00:44:33

Eardley-Pryor: What did you do to channel these new ideas to parallel with what you're doing in life?

04-00:44:37

Mair:

Well, the thing is that the person that turns on-fire. And this is what I call—whether it's from Che Guevara or from Fidel Castro, all the radicals in the world, Howard Zinn, all them. Once you become aware, your need, your rebellion against the system, becomes acute. And you're young, and that twenty-year-old, the twenty-five-year-old fire just turns on. "How dare you set me up?" And you learn that because of these class arrangements, no matter what, it's just a function of where you're born at.

You could be born structurally to disadvantage. This is a very powerful thing. This is mind-boggling because you go from that notion in high school, and all the old tropes whereby "poor people are lazy, and it's their fault. The conditions that you're in are actually a point of personal responsibility." You learn about the trap of the personal responsibility argument, which is another tool that they inflict upon the working class and underclasses because of their lack of understanding about how wealth and power accumulated and transferred and how it's done even inter-generationally.

Armed with these assets and tools, a lot of things really start to click. Things that I always loved, the stories of when our families had the reunions and the gatherings, all those stories took on a deeper meaning. I really understood slavery. I understood survival, and then I understood what slavery meant to my family and what it created for others. I understood acute inequality in the environmental forces and the power of the state, meaning national government, to reinforce these institutional arrangements. Undergraduate school and the acceleration and having great mentors was basically accelerating that learning and that process.

04-00:46:31

Eardley-Pryor: I see also a note here that not only are you reading [W.E.B.] Du Bois and understanding *The Souls of Black Folk* and the relationship of your family's history in a domestic context, but I have a note that you got a certificate in Southwest Asian and North African Studies. So, you're thinking about this on a global scale.

04-00:46:47

Mair: Yes. And so, with Jim Petras and then another mentor that would come into my life, Immanuel Wallerstein. Immanuel Wallerstein is one of probably the most prominent, powerful intellectuals at the time. There's one of those things where—just like [Joseph] LeConte had found [Louis] Agassiz and got him into his world of geology, which then took his career out West, and he's contributed to the geological sciences—my geologist, in this case my geophysicist, my rock doctor, was Immanuel Wallerstein.

04-00:47:19

Eardley-Pryor: Was Wallerstein a professor at Binghamton?

04-00:47:21

Mair: Yes, full professor at SUNY Binghamton. And he was the head of something called the Braudel Center, the Fernand Braudel Center. And he was then what was then the—

04-00:47:29

Eardley-Pryor: The *longue durée*. I mean, Wallerstein's pushing the systems theory.

04-00:47:32

Mair: World-Systems Theory. And that was my introduction. Once I got that path from Jim Petras and James Geschwender, and then my mentor, John McClendon, then I was primed to now hit the jet stream. And when I stepped into World-Systems Theory and Systems Dynamics and the notion of core states and core capital and peripherals, the issue of stratification and racism, it's just not only at an individual level, but it's between nation-state and nation-state arrangements.

And then I saw things like World War I in an entirely different context. I saw the world in an entirely global and different context. And so you really take on and start to look at the power of colonial and neo-colonial arrangements. And then you learn why the pedagogy now becomes a very dangerous pedagogy, because it literally starts dealing with the power arrangements within the global world order, and global world finance, global world capital, and why—and you see a lot of leftists jailed because the last thing you want is the working class to have this level of awareness and consciousness and then start to shape policy toward the interest of a collective versus the interest of a few.

04-00:48:50

Mair: And so, what you, and what I saw was the notion, like fractal geometry and fractal maths, how you can see big patterns. But they actually go all the way down to the microscopic. Patterns geometrically go down to a microscopic level. And with fractal math, you can absolutely go down to subatomic levels. And that's just the way, because at the smallest, that pattern just repeats itself but at a different scale. Those larger scales, that's what's controlling some of the sub-unit patterns.

But here's the thing. It doesn't have to be fixed. With our intellectual development, we alter that model. We can absolutely alter the shape of that fractal and break it into a new fractal dynamic. And so, class dynamics and systems dynamics, what you realize—and this is where your mind opens up, when you start your whole physics classes, and you learn about closed systems, and you start to learn about how the laws of physics apply to these social dynamic models—

04-00:49:47

Eardley-Pryor: You're pattern matching here from your different—history and then also the sciences coming together.

04-00:49:50

Mair: Absolutely. And it's this crucible of an undergraduate education that turns your mind just wide open.

04-00:50:01

Eardley-Pryor: The way you talk about your work—you're framing it in the contexts both with environmental issues, social issues, political issues, capital—it all is in such a systems framework. And that was one of the questions I had for you, was where did your systems thinking arise? It sounds like this is it.

04-00:50:19

Mair: This is it. This is where my systems thinking and where I learned the package, and my worldview was set. And in graduate school, stepping into that work, this was nothing more than finishing work and applied work and applied intensity up on top of that.

04-00:50:41

Eardley-Pryor: You continued on to grad school, but before that you also spent a semester abroad in Egypt.

04-00:50:47

Mair: Oh yeah. Well, that was part of—they always tell you that you should travel. You should—need to—step outside the United States.

04-00:50:56

Eardley-Pryor: Had you ever been out of the country before?

04-00:50:59

Mair: If Mexico, Canada, and the Caribbean constitutes out of the country, yeah. But, to me, being in the Americas was really basically being in America because these colonial dependencies were nothing more than feeder states or peripheral states.

But this was my first trip going abroad to Egypt. And you stop over in Europe. So this was the two-stop, three-stop, long-stop tour of a year abroad in which you absolutely are—just like a power dose. You really get to see the power of imperialism. But what was really fascinating abroad was how American intellectuals were acting in a foreign country.

04-00:51:44

Eardley-Pryor: What do you mean?

04-00:51:45

Mair:

By that, [I mean] the need for really putting forward the good face of the good Yankee. Because I remember getting into a discussion with a fellow. We were in a room of folks, and we were talking about imperialism. And this fellow was going on about the role of the US and State Department, how we've been a progressive force for change. And then I led in with the discussion of Vietnam and turned that upside down on its head. Because most times that you're abroad, a lot of folks do the good Yankee pitch, and Yankees come together. And little did they know is that they had this Immanuel Wallerstein acolyte sitting in the discussion

And it just totally blew that bourgeoisie argument out the window because it was just totally false. And the entire arrangement at that time in the Middle East was basically around the geopolitical influence of oil. And this is no different than the geopolitical influence of rubber and access to rubber propping up the French colonial interests, which were racist. Because at the point in time where the US had an opportunity under Woodrow Wilson to recognize Vietnam, it didn't. And when it came under FDR, again, to recognize Vietnam, it didn't.

And so these peripheral states, fighting for their independence just to be like the west, had to take up arms. But the west, in its propaganda, called them communists, actually created false alliances that were not there. But, eventually the enemy of my enemy becomes my friend. And the Ho Chi Minhs of the world, the Fidel Castros of the world, did become communists because that's where they could get the guns to resist the western imperialism.

04-00:53:28

Eardley-Pryor: I was [just] thinking, the Aswan Dam on the Nile in Egypt is Russian-funded.

04-00:53:33

Mair:

Well, not only that, but people forget the earlier Suez crisis. I grew up, and like you said, I—remember I was a voracious reader of the newspaper—so, when I connected the dots between the earlier Suez crisis and the later Yom Kippur War, and you saw the continuity of this relationship, you knew that it was not just simply 'Arabs hate Jews,' because the Suez crisis was basically the Israelis and the Brits going in to seize control of the Suez Canal so that the British can maintain its hegemonic interest over the Middle East and transport of oil through—now, oil and commodities and goods—versus having to ship it all around Africa.

Israel saw an opportunity for territorial interest, and so they linked up. And it took the Dulles' and Eisenhowers saying, "You're going to put it back." It was a humiliation of Britain and a humiliation of Israel. But you don't hear about that because that's outside of the victimhood. But everybody likes to

look at history in snapshots, and that's where you learn about incidents versus the longitudinal march of time. Snapshots are not how you judge history. So a lot of the stuff, once you go over there, you really understand what's happening in the Middle East.

04-00:54:44

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, and that brought daily. And *longue durée*.

04-00:54:46

Mair: You just cannot go by incident by incident, counting who hit who or who killed who today. You have to go back to—

04-00:54:56

Eardley-Pryor: This makes me wonder, too. You were doing your newspaper routes and reading about the Yom Kippur War and then the [1973] energy crisis in the wake of that. The Iran hostage crisis happened in '79. In the midst of that, there's this ongoing energy crisis. Did that have an effect on your life in the seventies and early eighties?

04-00:55:13

Mair: Of course it did, because, remember, I had a car at the age of sixteen, 1976. And so, when the oil crisis hit, I went from paying forty cents a gallon of gas to paying a dollar, man. That's sixty cents. You felt that. But, because of my limited worldview, my limited analysis, and all my analysis was the intellectual development of a kid with an almost Regents high school level education, which is as biased towards the US—it strips out, distills the rest of the world. It's all about America is great.

So, I saw the world as us versus them. I saw the Arabs as an existential threat. I saw the Iranians as an existential threat. I grew up in a Judeo-Christian household, and so the Israeli people were the apple of God's eye. They were the chosen people. I never framed it in the light of, "Wait a minute, [what] about Black people?" But there was a lot of Black radical talk about Blacks being the first. You had all the crazy talk. But you could discern that these were guys shooting off their mouth. But, from your cultural context of your Judeo-Christian underpinnings, et cetera, it was definitely a pro-Israeli, pro-West point of view.

04-00:56:18

Mair: And communists were bad. And communists were bad mainly because government said they were bad and that they were trying to destroy democracy. It never explained why democracy was under threat or what democracy meant. And defending freedom, it never explained how our freedom was immediately at threat in, say, Vietnam or Cuba, or why were we worried, the world's most powerful superpower. You had a little bit of dyslexia, but you had to trust what the president was saying. And you can't blame it on Republicans because Jimmy Carter was just—it was the continuity. It was a Democrat as well as Republican thing of, "Here's the

good world and here's the bad." So you had this duality-view of the world when you're in high school.

You go through college, and you go through this massive transformation. And remember, I began the journey of voracious consumption of intellectual materials in high school because I already realized that I was not adequate enough for college. And so, I'd already realized that I was behind. And then I hit this jet stream, and I realized really how much, how far behind I was.

04-00:57:31

Mair:

And so, I had a lot of friends that were going into computer science, pre-med. They were looking to be the next level of income. I was just voraciously eating and consuming and saying, "I've got to save my people." Mine went into, "How do I save my family? How do I save African-Americans? How do I save oppressed people of the Third World—the whole peripheral nations that are feeding capitalism?" So mine was not a pursuit of going out and getting an education and becoming another IBM employee. Mine was literally how was I going to go out to be this revolutionary with the best analysis to actually mobilize and rally a world to be a much more just place? And if we have to go out in the revolution, I have my Che Guevara shirt.

I really went into a lot of my deep left literature. I voraciously consumed Andre Gunder Frank. I actually had the privilege of taking a couple of seminars when he came through. So some of the leading World-Systems theorists and thinkers of their day, I've had the privilege of being around.

And one of the other little treats that came in, because, as I said, growing up we had our family reunions; we had our family history; we were already having these conversations. Alex Haley—the Black student union was able to bring Alex Haley to Binghamton University. So, not only did he sign my copy of *Roots*. He signed my *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. And so, my *Autobiography of Malcolm X* was one of those books that John McClendon said you had to read. I was into *Roots* because of the family history stuff and how it opened me up to this whole connection and feeling my family's history.

And then, at the same time, here's this radical piece, and I'm already being turned—again, I read poetry. I read Langston Hughes in high school, in English lit. But I've never read Langston Hughes with fire as when I was in college, because now I knew where he was coming from. You can then feel the fire and the power that was the [Harlem] Renaissance.

04-00:59:51

Mair:

And, to me, I felt both elated, emancipated but also severely depressed. There would be times you would cry in that, "My God, why wasn't I awake then? Why did I not know this is what that meant?" Billie Holiday, my mom had her records. And you heard the song "Strange Fruit." You hear all these things,

and then in college you find out this is tied to the lynchings. And you start to now connect the art, artistry, and the expressions of liberation and all these forms in patterns. You just have that deep, deep awakening.

So one of the things with my work in the Middle East is that it was then furthering a lot of that intellectual and radical development. And I ended up linking up with some friends, people who I'm still friends with to this day. But the point is that I also learned about our [the United States of America's] role abroad. And that got probably—who was talking? We really got into it. It was a probably a CIA plant there making—because this guy was so far off the right-wing wall, he was bananas.

04-01:01:10

Mair:

And, it was one of those conversations where, when we got done, you have this whole entourage of guys saying, “Hey, where did you learn?” They wanted to know who filled my pockets. And so, no, I just passed on the works of my mentors. And again, then we started to get into theoretical exchanges. And these things were very, very profound in shaping my intellectual development.

04-01:01:35

Eardley-Pryor:

What were you and Maria thinking about for next steps then? You're getting fueled with this fire of new knowledge and realizing broader pictures. And I'm wondering, how does it work with your life and your family and your community? What are you thinking for next steps after college?

04-01:01:47

Mair:

Well, the thing is that I really—when I got deep down in that rabbit hole, one of the things that came up was I realized all my friends were doing all this stuff to make money. And I just felt that you had all these other things. It was all this deep—it's like being in the ocean, how deep you can dive. And why would you want to go up there and look for a safety raft for creature comfort or transport amongst the surface when you can dive real deep?

And it didn't dawn on me that, yeah, you've got to pay for family, man. You've got to put food on the table. You've got to start thinking like Arnold now. You've got to get into the economic man mode. And, I did not give a lot of thinking to the economic man mode. And so, with a kid on the way, that was where I had to convert my military option to a paid option, because with the military you got the health plan. You got the VA. You got the other health benefits, and you got a larger chunk of income. I figured that I would go with that.

I wanted to actually—when I went in, I figured that my career path was to go in, work in Washington, DC, USAID or one of the big Imperial agencies, but somehow meld my theory. And it was insane. I was out of my mind. I never knew how incompatible these things were. But remember, I'm a working-class kid. I'm dealing in depths of intellectual awareness that I've just—

04-01:03:29

Eardley-Pryor: So you're at university, and you continue there to enroll in the doctoral program?

04-01:03:35

Mair: Right, right.

04-01:03:36

Eardley-Pryor: And it's while you're in the doctoral program, is when Marjana is born?

04-01:03:41

Mair: Right. And, what ends up happening was that Richard Dekmejian, who was in the political science program—

04-01:03:48

Eardley-Pryor: Was that your advisor?

04-01:03:49

Mair: Yes. One of the things that he did was a contact of a contact. And that's where they got me in over at the Naval Education Training Center.

04-01:04:02

Eardley-Pryor: Because you said, "Listen, here's my circumstances. I need something to work with."

04-01:04:06

Mair: And you had people and faculty who were aware, and they just got you to hook up. They got you to hook up. And so then with the military, it was a big transition there, because now I had to talk about another duration of separation from Maria. And now she's going to have this infant coming. And it was a real big thing and stress for her because, "Wait a minute. I've got this baby coming. You're not going to be around. But we need this money."

04-01:04:40

Eardley-Pryor: Had she graduated at that point?

04-01:04:41

Mair: Yes. She had graduated. And so, it's like, "Hey, how are we going to make this thing work?" And, so once I got in the Navy and was doing my thing, one of the things you have is a little connection and juice. You can do the inter-branch thing. So I showed up down there in my uniform, down at Peekskill. And it was funny because you've got your rank and everything, and all the soldiers are saluting. They're popping two to you as you're coming by.

And, they're like—and they saw the name "Mair," and they're like, "That's Aaron." So, they were like, "Oh, man, we didn't"—so they were freaking out. And so, I had already had a conversation with the major that was in charge of my sister Rhonda's—Rhonda's my next-to-youngest baby sister, she was in the United States Army. And I needed to find someone who was willing,

amongst my siblings. I talked with my siblings. And so Rhonda was the one that was willing to do it.

04-01:05:43

Eardley-Pryor: To do—?

04-01:05:45

Mair: Basically come up and stay with Maria and live with Maria while I did my service. I would be coming home on leave and breaks, but Rhonda basically agreed to do it. And all I had to do—so, it was basically filing of a lot of paperwork, going through the Navy to the Army.

04-01:06:06

Eardley-Pryor: But getting family to help support?

04-01:06:08

Mair: So that we can get family support. And they allowed for these things. One of the things that the military is big on is helping you get family. If you can find a caregiver, usually it's going to be family. And they know that that's the least expensive mode. They try to facilitate that. And so, the big thing with the military is making sure that their MOS [military occupational specialty] or their operating branch or their operating specialty is needed at that place, and the place that's giving up one, that they can afford to give it up.

But being near Westchester in New York City, it was duplicate, triplicates, and quadruplicates of everything. For Rhonda, she was mainly a cook. So there's millions of cooks in the Army. And so, it was not a blow to their force for her to do a couple of years lateral up to Binghamton.

04-01:06:58

Eardley-Pryor: And she got to be there to help raise your daughter.

04-01:07:01

Mair: And it was really cool because she got to be helping her sister-in-law, and they became very, very close. And she was there with the baby, and she loved Marjana. Marjana, one of the things about—it's the Famous Aunt Rhonda, because of all my siblings, almost all of my nieces and nephews, with the exception—I think there's no exceptions, because my older brother Dickie's children, Esther's boys, Ricky's kids, Rhonda at some point in the stage was camped out in somebody's house helping and doing that extended family work.

So, Rhonda was doing like Stella was doing—my cousin Stella Green was doing with her siblings, who were struggling with family, early career, and trying to make their lives, the military lives and their adult lives, work. And so, the military—

04-01:07:55

Eardley-Pryor: That's a pretty neat tradition in your family.

04-01:07:57

Mair: The military just basically—again, another level of class and super-information because the Naval Education Training Center or the Naval War College, all that's at Newport, Rhode Island.

04-01:08:08

Eardley-Pryor: And that's where you went into?

04-01:08:08

Mair: And that's where I went in and did my training and did my commissioning, right there. What's really powerful about that, that was the other thing that I needed. Because I was a volcano, an uncontrolled volcano, with all that radical[ism in college]. So you go from being this version and a person of color, dealing with racism and oppression, and now you know the sources of it. But you just don't know how to channel it in a disciplined and systemic way.

And so, while I learned systems thinking, I did not learn systems processing. And that's what the Navy gave me. That's what the Navy gave me. That's what helped me put it in the soup. That's what helped me—

04-01:08:52

Eardley-Pryor: What does that mean? What do you mean by "The Navy taught you systems processing?"

04-01:08:57

Mair: Well, the thing is that you always say the military—there's the Army way; there's the Navy way; there's the Marine way. And when they talk about the Corps, they have their disciplined way. Again, your power regimentation, your power structure and rank, and the authority and reverence that's given to that next level. It's really deep discipline. You have to really discipline yourself to stay within your rank. You've got to understand.

And there's sanctions. You could be court-martialed. They talk about the notion of the pay grade, operating out of your pay grade. You can't go up and start talking like you're a colonel or commander and you don't have that training. Again, the issue of training expertise and specialty, everything—you're given as much as 16, 32x, which is Naval intelligence. That's my branch. That's my specialty. That's my expertise.

So, there's surface warfare. First, when you went in, you learned the divisions between where you're going to go. Were you going to be staff or line? The line Navy is the fighting Navy. So that's your surface warfare, your boomers and your nuclear boys and your surface warfare, your fleet people. Your staff corps, which is the support, the line corps, that's where all the Naval intelligence, all that systems, all that processing, all that logistics that goes into feeding all that to the line, that goes out and engages in warfare and battle.

So there's the two halves of the brain, and you learn that role, and you learn that role and your function. So you don't go out and try to act just because you've got your rank or whatever that you're now just on par with any line. No, you learn that you're in support of that. But, in their role, these are the ones that are going to actually do dying.

You could theoretically do dying, too, because on some of these ships you also have Naval intel officers, depending upon where your role and your sub-specialty is, because on these ships you have your cryptology and cryptological ciphers, the people who share the intelligence between the land and to the fleet. And then between the fleet, you have the intelligence officers passing off, and then they hand the intelligence on to the ship captains or ship commanders. So, they are deployed that way, but mostly they're on a lot of your land bases. So, it's that vast shipless Navy. And I always tell people, I say, "For every person that you see at sea, there's a counterpart or two on land." And so, the Navy—

04-01:11:26

Eardley-Pryor: Did you have some qualms about going into the Navy after all this realization of the role of the state government, the US Government?

04-01:11:31

Mair: It was a huge contradiction. It was a huge tradeoff. I really had to focus on—and I also, within the discipline of just learning what you had to do just to be and do your specialty, you really had to learn how much comes out of your mouth. And so, when you're going into Intel, you really learn about information management and information control. You want to basically give the most effective intelligence and the accurate intelligence that's relevant to the situation.

So, you really learn how to compartmentalize and divulge. And so, whatever my leanings—my internal whatever, drive—you have to put that over here, and you have your mission on what you had to do. And you also realize your span of control, what you really have control over and what you're only able to affect. You're not the one that's deciding. You're not the civilian that's made the policy to execute an action.

That's the other thing. The military does not engage. It's the civilian government. So whatever the military is doing, it's executing a civilian policy. So, the deficiency of—people are saying that there's a deficiency with the military, it's not. It's a deficiency with our federal government and the civilian leaders that are basically creating the conditions of either declaring war, declaring intervention, declaring a policing action. And it's sort of like sending in the cops. The cops just don't theoretically go out. Yeah, you've got your exceptions, but the way the systems really are.

04-01:13:08

Mair:

So, two things happened. You pick up the intelligence on what the military's about and what it really does. And you really learn that—this is where I really realized how screwed up our civilian population was. That, A, it got into this war, but it didn't even help the nation itself process that the executive branch is really—and it's not really the soldiers. They're doing their job. And then when they come back, they're beat up for the actions of civilian decision-makers.

So, I was able to really get, as they say in the military, "Get your shit in one sock." So I was able to get that into one sock. There were a number of dynamic pieces that, had I not had my intellectual development at university, I still would have been struggling like a lot of military people who don't have that deep development struggle. Because people are like, "Why is this person like this?" Well, it's because of their training. Again, your training allows you to become a much more precision tool and instrument. You're precise in what you do and execute and how you engage.

04-01:14:12

Eardley-Pryor:

I see here [from my research notes] also that, while you were in your Naval Education Training Center in Newport, your second daughter, Heba, was born. Is that right?

04-01:14:22

Mair:

Yep. So, when I came home, it was one of those things where you're away and all that other stuff. And you come home, and you have fun. So, I'm getting my wife pregnant again, and all of a sudden here's—

04-01:14:30

Eardley-Pryor:

Two mouths now.

04-01:14:37

Mair:

Two mouths. So the problems were not shrinking and not being managed. I'm just adding to them. And while Marjana had the experience of knowing me and hugging Daddy and everything else, her first year pretty much I was around. Heba came, and I was pretty much not around. And she just knew Maria or Rhonda and her sister, Marjana.

04-01:14:59

Eardley-Pryor:

I want to just make sure we get dates on this. I have that Marjana was born in March of 1984, and Heba in September of 1985—just so time-wise, what we're talking about—

04-01:15:07

Mair:

Right. So, within that year, Heba comes, '85, '86. So she's growing up, and principally her world is just three people. So in '86 when I come home, it was really traumatic, and she was scared to come to me. When she was a toddler, she was just totally afraid and really just did not know.

04-01:15:27

Eardley-Pryor: How did that hit you?

04-01:15:29

Mair: It rocked me to my core. Two things happened. So, that's about the time when I knew I just had to start out processing, because my children did not know me. And, the effort to get money was not enough. And I had enough training where I knew I could—now with the military and my academic, I knew I could now parlay that into a decent job. So I contacted [my PhD advisor at SUNY Binghamton] Richard Dekmejian and told him what my case and situation.

04-01:15:58

Eardley-Pryor: Were you thinking you were going to continue with grad school?

04-01:16:00

Mair: Yes. So, I had to call and come back. So, I did get up enough times. You get that three years of service. So what happens was, I arranged to come back.

04-01:16:14

Eardley-Pryor: Into the doctoral program?

04-01:16:15

Mair: Into the doctoral program. The thing was that now, I had to be around and manage, but that was really, really tough on me. I think if I ever had a really tough psychological moment, it was the stress that even though Rhonda was there, and even though family was there, for Maria it was that if I were to go on that original plan, this is where we talk about course correction. She was asking legitimately, "Well, is this going to be our lives where I have to pack up and shift around and move around?" And she just told me, she said, "If that's going to happen, I can't do it."

And so you had the hard choices of, if I was going to do this, I was going to do this alone. That meant that she wanted to leave. She wanted to end this relationship. And the last thing I wanted to do is have my babies going off and being raised by somebody else. That was just not going to happen. So, the long and short of it is that the good old network came through. And so I was able to resign my commission, come out. And, they made a spot for me.

04-01:17:35

Eardley-Pryor: Who's "they"?

04-01:17:37

Mair: The political science department. They made a spot for me, and so I was tooling along and going to Rich [Dekmejian]. I said, "Hey, Rich, what have we got?" He goes, "Well, we've got this program. We've got this graduate program where you can then roll into state civil service. We'll hook you up. You finish up your graduate degree here, and you go on up to state civil service. And you're set."

So, I went through that, and this was a program with SUNY Binghamton and Rockefeller College right here at SUNY Albany. They had this handshake program. And at that time, Governor [Mario] Cuomo, they had this whole little thing where all these nice little, what they called these—not an assistantship—oh, goodness, like an urban scholar. It's more than the mentorship because you're almost at civil service pay grade.

04-01:18:33

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, are you talking about an internship, essentially, but through school?

04-01:18:36

Mair: Yeah. But it's a little bit more, because people say—it's a little bit more to it than that. But, in short, that's what I ended up in. So, I ended up in the [New York State] Department of Social Services here, working for the Medicaid program.

04-01:18:48

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, that brought you to Albany?

04-01:18:49

Mair: Yeah, it brought me to Albany. So, I was here in late '86. I was there for part of the fall semester, talking about starting spring semester in '87. So, I actually had to come here. So, actually I was going to do my spring work at SUNY Albany and Rockefeller College in 1987. So I got here that winter. So I had the winter of '86 and the early part of '87 to find a place to stay and live for the family, and then get set up and then settle in for the spring semester at Rockefeller College, and then connect up with the program here.

So, I got an apartment right over here at 123 Livingston Avenue in Arbor Hill. It was a nice little brownstone building, nineteenth century. It was a freshly renovated house with roaches. It's really kind of funny, because you go out and you spend this whole window of your existence without roaches. And you get this apartment. It's a really nice, fully renovated house. And you're like, "How the hell do they do a full rehab and renovation?" And you realize other tenants can bring them with them.

04-01:20:14

Eardley-Pryor: Or sometimes it's the water heater that's been sitting in a warehouse with roaches. And then they bring that in.

04-01:20:20

Mair: And they transport it.

04-01:20:20

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, that happened to me. So, you moved to Albany in the winter of '86 into '87 to start school there, start this program where you're essentially preparing for state service.

04-01:20:33

Mair: Yes. Well, basically, you're going to get your graduate degree. You start your career, and you start as an entry-level manager. And so, that's what you're doing.

04-01:20:47

Eardley-Pryor: What kind of state work were you interested in doing?

04-01:20:50

Mair: At that time, I was doing computer programming. And so, what happens is that as part of your electives you take a Cobol course or two, what have you, and you've already got—within my curriculum, I've had enough economics classes; I have my statistics classes; and you have programming. And so, you have statistics, economics, and you got into econometric modeling. And your advanced statistics in graduate school, you're still using the same econometric modeling as your advanced econ classes. So, these things actually got great handshake. It's like one rolls into the other.

04-01:21:32

Eardley-Pryor: It's more pattern-matching you're doing.

04-01:21:34

Mair: Absolutely. And so, I ended up in the Medicaid management information system, because I figured that that was the place to be.

04-01:21:42

Eardley-Pryor: Why?

04-01:21:43

Mair: Why? Because it's a big data set. One of the things I always knew, that if you had bad data or incomplete data, you can end up with crappy projects. And so, you wanted to go where the data was, and that was where the mind was. So, MMIS [Maintenance Management Information System] was the entire Medicaid population of the state of New York, and so you got no better data than that.

So I started out working on something called the intermediary file, which they felt was a good place to start. The intermediary file is a subsystem within the Medicaid management system that is part of what they call surveillance and utilization review. And what that basically breaks down to is that you're looking at how people are consuming medical services statewide. And you're looking at not only how they're doing it, but what particularly are they using it? And then you match it against the expertise of those providing those services and making sure that these things all line up. It's another auditing and accounting system.

And this is where it was kind of cool, because then that's where you find where a lot of fraud was occurring. Because a lot of people assume you go to a doctor and you get a prescription and you get a service. And what was really

neat was that we developed subsystems that, yeah, you got to a doctor, but we ran it against the state master file. So we knew every single doctor in the state of New York. And in those cases on border states, coming in from those borders, but even their specialists, you knew exactly what they were trained in and what their specialty was.

And that was important. Why? Because if you are a senior citizen going in for a prostate cancer check, and all of a sudden you get a claim back for obstetric services, meaning like you're a pregnant woman—

04-01:23:34

Eardley-Pryor: Something's not right.

04-01:23:35

Mair: Exactly. So, you start looking at the procedures and services that were provided by a particular doctor for a given patient, because doctors in crappy billing places or corrupt billing places were just putting in any procedure.

04-01:23:47

Eardley-Pryor: So, you're doing data [analysis] and now also finding fraud within the Medicaid system of New York?

04-01:23:51

Mair: Exactly. And so, this was what they called early fraud review. This is what ultimately led to capitation programs. It actually started when we started finding really outlier, or what they call aberrant-use patterns, that one to four percent of the Medicaid population—and, mind you, it was millions. One to four percent can cost you millions. Case in example, you have one guy that's walking around getting thousands of dollars' worth of shoes, sneakers, a month because the podiatric services. The Edison checks on how many you should have.

04-01:24:32

Eardley-Pryor: Wait, he's buying Air Jordans with Medicaid shoe money?

04-01:24:35

Mair: Oh, yeah. These guys were going out, and they get a prescript. If you got—under normal circumstances, you'd get a podiatrist who gives a valid prescription for podiatric service and then orthopedic shoes.

04-01:24:49

Eardley-Pryor: He's getting his Italian wingtips from Medicaid. I love it.

04-01:24:52

Mair: So these guys would go out and just get shoes. And they were stockpiling them. They would sell them back. So it was actually fueling a black market in shoes and sneakers. And this was one of the earlier cases of fraud. So, as we started putting these systems in places and tracking the various permutations of fraud, it was really amazing.

And so, we ended up creating something called a recipient restriction program. And this is the first time you basically said, people who are shopping around for medical services, you can tell whether they're shopping around, because they don't feel good, and they've got a problem. They'll stop at one doctor. And the way the Medicaid program used to be set up, you had a universal rite of access to health care. So you could go to see any doctor. As long as you got your Medicaid card and they were Medicaid, you could go to any doctor.

And so, what happened was that the intent was good. But what it didn't control for was for people—"I didn't resolve my case, so I go to another doctor. And I didn't resolve my case, and I'd go to another doctor." There was no edit in there saying, "No, you've got to stay with your doctor, stay with your treatment, what have you." Those edits did not exist.

04-01:25:56

Mair:

So, this whole capitation program and restriction program was to keep people monitored. So, we actually ended up creating these medical review teams that would go out and just audit these claims and say, "Hey, there needs to be case management." So, these were the early cases of case management. And what that led to eventually is your capitated care.

And, somebody in the state had the dumb idea that fraud has occurred everywhere. So they used the multiplier for the one or two percent that were really aberrant use, and they generalized over the whole Medicaid population. And that was when that early error—about twenty three billion dollars in Medicaid fraud was being occurred. And right around '88, '89, the politics of Medicaid fraud became this crazy thing. Republicans were running around because you now have a measure, or a multiplier or a coefficient, that you just said, if this level of fraud is occurring amongst this population, then multiply it times the whole population and you can get a rough estimate.

04-01:26:54

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, so it was all based on bad data?

04-01:26:56

Mair: Yeah.

04-01:26:57

Eardley-Pryor: The fraud was happening, but to project it—

04-01:26:59

Mair: It's based upon good data but poor modeling and poor analysis. If you've got good data, and you design a poor model, it will lead to faulty analysis. And so, cost containment programs and capitated care programs. Then they said, "Well, we can't manage it, and the doctors can't manage it. Why don't we bring in these HMO-type entities to come in and manage the care? At least people can be gatekeepers on their recipients' utilization, and they can restrict them to that."

So, this takes that and treats every recipient like it's the worst recipient. And, unfortunately, I was part of some of the earlier modeling on that. But, I did not shape the policy. And even when the policy leaders on that were coming up with the policies, I stood against it. I said, "Hey, you can't really say that about the *whole* population. It's *this* population." But they're going, "Well, if we apply this to everybody, if everybody got case management, we can net these savings."

And so that's when the other guys who do the voodoo math come in, that you're going to save this many billions of dollars, which then they then feed into the governor, and that goes into a budget message and yada-yada-yada. So, in short, that gets funded. And so, what was really funny is that I did not know. And even though a couple of the guys who were part of the earlier cost containment and managed care plans, these were all the guys that were senior-level managers within the Medicaid program.

04-01:28:24

Mair:

And they went out to go head up MVP [Health Care], which is one of the biggest HMOs in the state of New York. Empire, Blue Cross and Blue Shield, a lot of these guys got in on the ground floor in the methodology. And as this thing got privatized and managed care became state policy in the early nineties, these guys went out to become the early executives in these places. Many of them became millionaires. And I didn't become a millionaire from the model, but a lot of other people did become millionaires from the model. But it also altered the way healthcare was delivered in the state of New York.

04-01:28:57

Eardley-Pryor:

So, take me back to your move to Albany, because you're starting to do this work on big data, economic modeling of health outcomes. And at home, living in Arbor Hill—

04-01:29:14

Mair:

Well, my wife and them wasn't here. So, when I came here I finally got the apartment, brought them all here. They were happier then, pleased as punch, because we were all together.

04-01:29:21

Eardley-Pryor:

Family.

04-01:29:22

Mair:

The last bit of family duty and service was my cousin Darryl McKenzie and Rhonda. They all rode in the U-Haul truck, helped me pack that up and moved the family here. The girls were just happy to have the new apartment. It was larger than the small apartment we had in Binghamton, New York.

And we were setting up, and Maria was just thinking about working in Norwich as a schoolteacher. I says, "No, why don't we come to Albany?" And so, she had to change up her career plans, but she still commuted from Albany to Norwich, New York, because she was just entering on her education

[career]. She finished her Master's in teaching, so she got her teaching certificate, but she already had a guaranteed job. So, the only issue for her was the hour and a half commute to her job in Norwich, New York. So, she had to still keep going down Route 88.

04-01:30:19

Eardley-Pryor: Hour and a half commute for a school teacher?

04-01:30:21

Mair: Yeah, for her job. So, she would have to literally go halfway the distance to Binghamton, New York from Albany, about midway, to go to Norwich. And it was crazy. It was crazy, but she had a teaching certificate so that she could teach. The issue then was how quickly could she find a teaching job?

04-01:30:39

Eardley-Pryor: In Albany?

04-01:30:40

Mair: In Albany. So, really, she had—so, we came in the winter of '87. So, literally we were expecting by the fall of '87 she would find a teaching job in the [New York state] capital region. So, it really was not like a long-term problem.

04-01:30:53

Eardley-Pryor: Especially with a master's degree.

04-01:30:54

Mair: Right. But the point also here is that she also saw stability. She also saw that we're going to be as a family in the place. And so, then the conversation during that period was what were we going to do, and where we were going to really live. And we had a choice to [make] based upon our projected income and where we were going. We were a young urban professional couple. The question became whether we're going to live in the suburbs or whether we're going to live in the city of Albany. And her income, her projected income—because at that time we were earning about \$45,000 a year. But I knew that by the following year, we would be earning about sixty to eighty thousand. So, there was a little bit of a window there.

04-01:31:49

Eardley-Pryor: Why, because of your opportunities, or for her to get a teaching job?

04-01:31:51

Mair: Well, if you would go to the suburbs, you would want the higher economic opportunities. And I'll get to the reason why our income thresholds matter, because we really had to make some quick decisions.

So we were in Arbor Hill, and we saw a community that looked like where we came up and where we grew, but a little bit more African-American.

04-01:32:14

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, tell me about Arbor Hill. Set the context.

04-01:32:16

Mair: Arbor Hill—when I moved to Albany, Arbor Hill was the centermost community. It allowed me to walk to work, number one.

04-01:32:26

Eardley-Pryor: It's right on the edge of the capital district.

04-01:32:27

Mair: It was. Arbor Hill, at that time I did not know a whole lot, but it was the Black area of the city, predominantly African-American, historically African-American—Albany being one of the oldest settlements which had Black slaves. This was where the African-American presence goes all the way back to the sixteenth century, heavily in this state. Remember, there was over almost 100 years of slavery *before* the English came and took control and brought *their* slavery with them. The Dutch had slaves here.

So Arbor Hill was one of the most historically old communities. It used to be one back in the heyday of the early settlement. The center of the city was over in Arbor Hill, down along Clinton Avenue, all those old buildings. That was where the old mansions were. It wasn't until the mid-nineteenth century that it moved up onto Elk Street, and then later to Pine Hills and started going west. But Arbor Hill historically was that center.

It became a Polish community, a predominantly immigrant Polish community. Before that, it was the Irish community. Then it became a Polish community. Then, it became a heavily German community. It's seen its waves of immigrants throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. And it was still heavily Polish and German and Irish right up through the fifties and early sixties of the twentieth century. But it had, early in earnest, begun to transition from the mid-sixties as more Blacks started to move into the city. And then white flight took over.

04-01:34:11

Mair: But, what it did have was the history of St. Joseph's. It had Catholic schools. It had a number of elementary schools. The schools were basically built around the community. So we had an idea. My wife says, "Well, look, I can try. If you can get a job where you can walk to there," she goes, "Let me try to get a job here in the city." And there was an Arbor Hill Elementary School, and there was Livingston Middle School, both within Arbor Hill.

And up on that hill were the schools, which were along the street called Manning Boulevard. It's called Dudley Heights, the Dudley Heights section of Arbor Hill. They were thinking about building new affordable-income houses. And so, this is why my income then mattered. So we got tipped off that they're going to be putting in a phase of affordable-income housing, and it was going to be right up there. And at that juncture, I did not know that they were building on a parkland. It was trading off. In a couple of areas, they were

building all this affordable housing, and the open space that they were building was on top of parklands. They were already trading off.

But again, I was not really an environmentalist at that time. To me I was just nothing but a young professional seeking to get—“Hey, get me a stake. Get me a home like my dad.” Hey, twenty-seven years old—twenty-seven, twenty-eight years. So I get to own my home.

04-01:35:29

Eardley-Pryor: Two babies at home, and yeah.

04-01:35:31

Mair: Listen, I go from zero to sixty fast. I beat my dad. Twenty-seven, twenty-eight, get to own a house, and boom-boom-boom. So, Maria applied for teaching jobs at the schools. She applied with the city school district. And, she basically never heard back. We find out, not until much later, that she was the victim of basically discriminatory hiring practice by not selecting her. So, they never got back to her. She literally waited up until almost the beginning of the school year in the summer of '87. She had to know by June/July, so that she could prepare, because most places had already hired their faculty.

So, she threw in her application also at some of the suburban schools, and they actually responded. So she got a lot of bites from the suburban schools, and they, by the way, were much closer [than Norwich, New York]. They were all within twenty, twenty-five minutes' drive of Arbor Hill. And so, she ended up taking a job at Mohonasen, which was a school district at that time. It was almost ninety percent, ninety-five percent white. The few African-American kids that were there were part of—there was a little Naval Reserve area, and so they had military-base housing there. And most of the Black kids came out of the military-base housing that was right there in Rotterdam. But, be it as it may, income and money. She took the job because they also paid her the extra money for her Master's degree.

04-01:37:01

Eardley-Pryor: Why did y'all choose to stay in Arbor Hill if she got this gig out in the suburbs?

04-01:37:05

Mair: Well, we had this conversation. And one of the conversations that she had and we had, because from her experience working at Norwich and seeing how children of color were treated in those schools, she was worried about our daughters being the only Black kids in a classroom and then being harassed. Maria, when she came here, she was harassed for not speaking English. She was harassed. In fact, Mary Jo McCall, the Peekskill High School, literally did, in front of a lot of folks, “Why don't you people speak English?” talk. And that really hurt her.

And so, her issue of making sure that her daughters were going to be judged by the content of their character. And that she wanted to make sure they went to a diverse setting where the kids looked like them versus being the outlier, and then them being picked on for their race, which I totally agreed with. And I said, “Hey, why not give back?” This is within the bailiwick of what my dad would expect. And this is within the bailiwick of what my family has raised me to do.

We’ve been part of these organized community clusters. “Hey, you found solidarity,” and actually, “Hey, we’re doing good. We can give back. Let’s move in, and if things change, we could sell the house, and we could always move out.” But the main thing then was finding a community where we can raise our daughters without them being racially harassed. And then, number two, building equity, owning a home, and a quick path. It all made sense to try to qualify for an Affordable Housing Program house, which we did.

04-01:38:42

Mair:

And it was kind of interesting because we initially, they tried to disqualify us. The people that were writing and processing the application were a group of white male lawyers. And so, I remember this guy, this one lawyer, who was processing our application. He denied it. And, when you saw that your income had to be below \$40,000 for a family of four, we said, “We’re below \$40,000.” I said, “And we should qualify.” And so, we filed all of our taxes and everything else, and they still kept denying us.

So, we actually went to the city’s Affirmative Action Advisory Commissioner, and we filed a complaint and a grievance. And, we found out that this guy was going outside the criteria to discriminate against us. And then that’s when we were tipped off by the guy who ran—Frank Alfonso, who was the commissioner, one of the few African-American commissioners of anything in the city of Albany under Tom Whalen.

And, that’s when we found out—he says, “Look, you don’t understand how Albany works.” And then that’s when he broke it down to us that you had to be registered within the Party, get your ward leaders involved. I go, “Why do we have to do all that?” He goes, “No, no, no.” And so, that’s when I had to go take my stuff and meet the ward leader. And I met with a guy called Homer Perkins, who was one of the big ward leaders at that time.

04-01:40:11

Eardley-Pryor:

Are you talking about Democratic Party ward leaders?

04-01:40:12

Mair:

Democratic Party ward leader in Arbor Hill. And this guy was this very semi-literate, very ignorant African-American male. This guy, he basically was a guy that gets out votes. And, he gets them out so effectively, you rise up in the ranks. And so, in a way it’s sort of like a patronage system. And so, it was this raw, old-fashioned machine politics, which we did not know about. And, I

kind of bristled. You go through all this, and you've got to deal with this joke system. I said, "This cannot be true. A government can't be run this way." But, yes, that's the way it was run in Albany.

But the long and short of it was that we managed to get a light shone on the process. The commissioner, who then reviewed it and saw that there was going to be more trouble and more attention drawn to it, he told the guy to process the application. And, I went back and I told the guy, I go, "Why were you trying to disqualify us?" And so they had us all in a room, and the guy said, "Look, in a few years," he goes, "your income is artificially depressed because you're in all these programs." But he goes, "But once you get your degree, you're going to earn a lot of money. And you shouldn't be here." And I go, "What kind of horse crap is that?" I said, "Don't you want people here whose income does go up, and they bring the kind of middle-class values to the community?" And he goes, "No, we want this."

He was a white male trying to tell Alfonso—who was at the Affirmative Act[ion Commission and] was African-American—my wife, and then another panel of white males that were in the room, what his idea of the Affordable Housing Program basically was. He saw it as a middle-class utopia for people basically bordering on welfare. And I told him, I says, "But that doesn't work." And so, here I'm giving him a data model and saying, "Listen, this is why that doesn't work. People struggling to pay, they will default on their mortgages."

04-01:42:12

Mair:

I said, "You're trying to create a program where everybody would default on their mortgages. It fails. And the community looks horrible because you've got people in an economic trap in housing, that they've got to have progressively higher scales of income. They have to have a progressive income future for this thing to work." And I said, "So why would you chase out young professionals?" I said, "This program could actually attract in what they call a cohort."

I told him, "Let's do a cohort analysis." And the guy goes, "A what?" I said, "Cohort analysis." So you get this population of young urban professionals coming in out of university, settling into the community. And as their income's going, you start to—I said, "The community starts to look like the old Harlem Renaissance, where you actually had the Black middle class in the community." I said, "What happened, what killed Harlem, was when the intelligentsia moved out because they had the means to move out." But I said, "You've got this program where people by law, in agreement, have to live here for fifteen years. They've got a fifteen-year living indenture." So, I said, "You've got fifteen years of middle-class young professionals mentoring a poor community."

And I go, “And that works.” I go, “That makes sense. Why are you trying to replicate the ghetto?” And I said, “Are you really trying to make this program?” I turned to Frank Alonso, and I said, “I think this guy’s trying to tank this program.” And I said, “The press should be called in.” And when I said that, that’s when he’s like, “Okay, we’re going to fix this.” And in short, we got the mortgage. We got the mortgage at our income rate. They didn’t do us a favor. They just followed the law.

04-01:43:46

Mair:

And that was one of my early winks into [ways] that things are being done strange. But more importantly, people of color really aren’t empowered even over something as mundane as an Affordable Housing Program. One of the things I immediately saw was that all the programs where there’s any middle management and up, they were run mostly by whites but serving the Black community. And it was all *their* values and norms over what the *community* should look like and be like and how it should act.

And the African-American community just accepted that arrangement because their relationship with ward leaders like Homer Perkins. If there was a problem, they didn’t go complain to these commissioners. They just filed complaints with Homer Perkins, and nothing ever changed. And so, this retardation of the community, which to me was extremely bizarre, because I come from Westchester. I come from Westchester, outside of Harlem. I’m the child of a Harlem organizer. I come from this rich heritage of pulling yourself up and leaning on your family networks and moving the family up. I said, “This is insane. This is crazy.” And you come to Albany, and you literally had something like it’s off of an 1876 Reconstruction-era plantation mode thinking. So, that was—

04-01:44:58

Eardley-Pryor: Let’s take a break here just for a second.

(break in audio)

04-01:45:01

Eardley-Pryor: Okay, Aaron. So, you were just telling me how you had moved to Albany and chosen the Arbor Hill area. Something that happened in Arbor Hill before you even moved here was the creation of something called ANSWERS, that plays a big role in your life.

04-01:45:16

Mair:

Yes. Well, two things. So, in getting that house on the hill, so we’re transitioning out of the apartment. We’ve got another year to wait for the house to be built and what have you. So we got a parcel that’s in the Dudley Heights, so it’s the desirable place. So, there was several locations where they were building the affordable housing. One was on Colony Street. There was an open-air [illicit] drug market that we noticed, and we figured that we did not want to be anywhere near that.

So, we were looking at other places, and one of the most desirable places was in Dudley Heights, which is almost the northeast corner of the city at one of its highest points. And what was great about living over at Dudley Heights, you could walk down the street to hit the elementary school, so you basically had to walk the equivalent of a little over a quarter of a mile, just walking down the sidewalk to the elementary school. But it's something that you could walk to.

And also, the same distance, it's equally distant from the middle school. So, we saw that we could build a house in a location that was equally distant, so our kids were between the middle school and the elementary school. So, they would basically begin their first eight years of education within a couple of blocks of home. What was also neat is that there was a park. There was a tennis court. There were basketball courts. There were baseball fields. And as you went toward the middle school, there was a Tivoli Preserve. So, we saw these parks, these green spaces.

04-01:46:43

Eardley-Pryor: What's the Tivoli Preserve?

04-01:46:44

Mair:

The Tivoli Preserve was once the old reservoir for the city of Albany. And that was where Albany learned a powerful education on bugs and contamination, because the West Albany Rail Yards was right up on the Tivoli Preserve. Everybody needed fresh water for drinking and what have you. And the West Albany Rail Yards, which at the day was one of the biggest industrial centers in upstate New York, was when they manufactured locomotives. But everything was discharged into the Patroon Creek, which fed into Tivoli Preserve, which was a reservoir, which fed the water supply in the city. So, it was a gravitational system on the heights, in the Dudley Heights. The gravity then fed down and supplied the city with its water.

So, there was a massive cholera epidemic because all the industrial waste from the rail yards and cattle yards and stockyards and slaughterhouses that were near—because you had to be close to the railroad yards to ship meat and everything else—all that flowed into the Patroon Creek, which flowed into the Tivoli Lake, which then poisoned the water supply, and a number of people died in a massive cholera epidemic that struck this city. So, they had to relocate the water supply.

04-01:47:52

Mair:

But when they abandoned Tivoli Lake as a reservoir, it became a park and a preserve. They actually, at one point in time up to the late twentieth century, they had done the observatory. They had an observatory once up there. Potters used to get the potter's clay. They had a baseball league. They had a wading pool, they had a WPA-style wading pool. It was a very, very big recreational asset. But with the building of the I-90 corridor, they actually dug out the pools and took out a lot of the infrastructure so the arterial could cut through.

The preserve still remained there, but a lot of the other recreational amenities and assets that made the community attractive were taken away.

But where we were at on the north side of Manning Boulevard, we were still at the heights. You still had safe passage. You only had to cross the road once you got to Livingston Middle School, and there was a crosswalk. And it was still safe passage to go down to Arbor Hill Elem[entary]. So, it was the perfect place to raise a family and to build a home. It's like you couldn't make it any more ideal.

04-01:49:01

Mair: So, you had the history of a walkable community, an old historic community. You can imagine all these other attractions. And, I could walk to work. It would be perfect. So, if my wife ended up with a teaching job, it would have been excellent. When we were living at 123 Lark, we noticed the ANSWERS incinerator.

04-01:49:25

Eardley-Pryor: When you were living in that apartment, when you first came?

04-01:49:26

Mair: We were living in the apartment. Because every day you would go out, and your cars were covered with soot and ash. And we were wondering what that was about. That's when we were informed by residents in the community, "Oh, it's the incinerator."

04-01:49:39

Eardley-Pryor: This is the Albany New York Solid Waste to Energy Recovery System, ANSWERS.

04-01:49:44

Mair: Yes. This was ANSWERS. This was a waste-to-energy recovery system stated to be state-of-the-art. It was designed to deal with the solid waste prices of the eighties. If you remember then, they had the garbage barges. They had them waiting for the fresh kills to fill up to capacity. It was the embarrassment of what do you do with your solid waste streams. So, Albany being so-called ahead of the curve decided to work with an eight-county consortium of a bunch municipalities to basically burn their garbage in the incinerator.

The issue is that, while this was a desired good, the issue is where you put this negative amenity. And that negative amenity was sited in the African-American community. It took advantage of two things—actually, three things: The need for cheap energy; the need for jobs; and its weak political infrastructure relying upon that guy, Homer Perkins, and the Democratic [Party] machine.

04-01:50:42

Mair: So, Homer Perkins became the salesman to the community, the Black community, that "Here's going to be jobs coming into the community." And

his committee men went out telling people that they're going to get either free or reduced electricity. And again, he was making these claims, wild claims, without any backing. But basically it passed muster in the community. So, when you tell poor and starving people that they're going to have money and they're going to be fed—it's sort of like going into West Virginia. It's like, why do West Virginia people put up with the coal industry? Because it's what feeds them. It's what provides them an income. So, if people had an alternative means, they would not make that choice. And when you politically sell it to them and you have a voice that they trust, like a Homer Perkins, people swallowed that. They allow for it to come in.

And the plant never operated right since the day it opened. It always malfunctioned. It always had incomplete burns. And the way it worked was that they take all the solid waste out to the Rapp Road Landfill in the western end of the city, which is toward Colonie [a suburb of Albany]. They would then sort and process the garbage. Supposedly they were supposed to be doing separation, so that paper would be separated out, and they would then be dried, shredded, and shipped down for fuel. Well, they didn't do any waste separation. Everything was raw garbage, and everything was all ground up together. It was all shredded together. It had even things that weren't paper at all. You had TV sets, you name it. Whatever can go into a shredder, they threw it in the shredder. And then it was shipped downtown to burn.

But the odor problem that it caused in that end of the city, we found out that residents out there at that end of the city were getting compensation. Now, we didn't find it out until a lot later that they weren't getting an economic benefit because of the odor caused by the garbage. But the residents where the garbage was being burned, who were actually being poisoned by the gas, they got absolutely nothing.

So the way this consortium was set up, the state of New York would incinerate the shredded waste. The shredded waste, because it's an old steam-fire power plant, you could either use gas, coal, oil—whatever you used as a fire to make steam. In this case, they burned garbage. And so, what would happen is that steam would then go power the electric generators that provide energy to where I worked at in the capitol. So, all of the Capitol Hill complexes—the governor's mansion, the legislature, all the state courts—all the apparatus that ran the most sophisticated and advanced state in the union, if not the Eastern Seaboard, was coming from burning garbage in a Black community.

So, the early stages, what I noticed was the issue of soot. I did not pay attention to the impacts on health because, at that time, I was worried about settling my family, and we were worrying about getting a job.

04-01:53:40

Eardley-Pryor: And so you see ash and stuff on your car?

04-01:53:43

Mair:

Yeah, you would come out, and there would be varying degrees since we were living west of the plant—because Arbor Hill runs north and south, and if you live on either side of the road, you're east or west. We lived on the western side. We're about a quarter mile west of the plant, of the smokestack. So, that was outside of the prevailing wind pattern. But still, it was so much ash and soot that still a lot of particulates would coat your car.

And, the prevailing wind pattern—again, the southerly winds that, when you're talking about the summer months, the winds coming out of the south blowing north would carry it north. And, the northerly winds would come out of the north blowing south, would carry it on south of the city. So you had different points. But the way the Capitol Hill was situated, with the state Education Building at One Commerce Plaza, they served like walls that would then, as this soot would hit them, it would roll but roll back down in Sheridan Hollow.

04-01:54:49

Eardley-Pryor:

Oh, wait. So, when you have these northern winds, instead of blowing the soot across the city, it would hit these tall buildings and then come right back into this Black community?

04-01:54:58

Mair:

And, the technology was defeated. The incinerator was a tall stack that, if it was in a plain, flat football field, essentially it would carry [the soot] aloft and further away. That's assuming that it was a perfect burn and that the fuel met the proper dry specifications of burning paper. But since it was burning food and other stuff, and TV and metals and plastics, it was heavier, dirtier, much more carbon and other toxins and pollutants were coming out of it. So, it was a heavier, dirtier ash cloud, and heavier, dirtier ash clouds don't rise. And the fuel was never hot enough, so it would never rise high enough.

04-01:55:43

Eardley-Pryor:

How did you know that there were these toxins in there?

04-01:55:45

Mair:

We would find out later on. But, you could tell by the thickness of the smoke. We would not find out until the eruption in the prices a little bit later. But, right now, where we lived at, relative to the plant, we were just getting the dosing and the dusting. We were still trying to fight and find jobs and get involved in the community.

So by that time, I met a gentleman by the name of Art Mitchell, who was a Negro League ballplayer who was like a local city legend. He was the opposite of Homer Perkins. So, you had a good cop and a bad cop. I finally ended up in the court of the good cop. And so, Art Mitchell was the guy that gave me the one-on-one in the community. He saw me speak at a community meeting on affordable housing and some of the things that we had went

through. And I was able to articulate what had happened to us with regards to the city's Affordable Housing Program.

04-01:56:43

Eardley-Pryor: So, you were already getting involved in community activism.

04-01:56:45

Mair: Exactly. Well, the thing is that—one of the things my father said, “When you go into a community, you’ve got to get involved. Become part—no matter what you do—become part of an association. Be part of something.” This is that union organizer thing, the solidarity in people. Because I already run into this thing where I’m trying to be smart, intellectual, get a house. And here’s a group of white guys, and the one Black guy I turned to seemed like he was working for them. And then the other guy gives me a little bit of insight, but he also gives me a little bit of the network of who to talk to. And so, one of the people he told me who to talk to and really get the lowdown was Art Mitchell. So, Frank Alfonso pointed me to Art Mitchell.

When I hooked up with Art Mitchell, Art Mitchell really gave me the one-on-one in the community. And Art Mitchell ran something. He was the founder of something called the *Scene* newspaper. And he had a [radio] show called “News, Views, and Interviews,” and it was at WROW and AM 590. It was broadcast out of the ABC affiliate up on Northern Boulevard, which would later become Henry Johnson. So, this was before it ended up out in Latham.

04-01:57:48

Mair: So Art was really intrigued with me and impressed with my background. He says, “Listen, I want you to come on my show. I want to introduce you to the community.” So I had my debutante interview with Art Mitchell. And you’re young, in your twenties, and I get to talk a little bit about my class analysis. I’m dropping a little Immanuel Wallerstein. I’m dropping Martin Luther King. I’m dropping Malcolm. I’m just talking all of the reasons why the community needs to be engaged and empowered and what have you.

And he was really taken. He says, “Dude, you’ve got to write for me. You’ve got to write for me.” And he gave me the number of a guy called Reggie Knox, who then was the editor of the *Scene* newspaper. Reggie Knox, that’s where I met Reggie Knox. I went down to the *Scene*. I got my press card. I met Barbara Allen, James Bolden—these were like the young Black professional middle-class civil servants who were living in Arbor Hill. They were really engaged.

And they really got me with what I call the right people. And the right people were those who were not selling out, who were not betraying, who were not looking to earn a buck on the back of the Black community, but people who came in. Barbara was from Manhattan, from the Harlem area where my father grew up. James Bolden was a local native. But Reggie Knox, I think, was from Brooklyn. So, a lot of these folks were from out of town.

04-01:59:15

Eardley-Pryor: And the *Scene* was this place that helped bring it all together. This was an Arbor Hill newspaper?

04-01:59:19

Mair: This was an Arbor Hill newspaper. This is one of the most classic examples of just a middle-class or petit bourgeoisie entity like a newspaper, an information organ. It was pulling together this talent. And we all became very close friends. And Reggie also was affiliated with something called Blacks in Government, which was like a civil service of Black professionals working in the state. So, I was trying to build my network because I wanted to rise up in the civil service. And I wanted to be with like-minded, educated, upwardly-mobile middle-class Blacks that could help serve and just really be a core.

So, I learned about the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and the Urban League, and I saw that they were really still affiliated with cliques, that I did not really want to affiliate because they were still connected with insider versus outsider of the community. A lot of the NAACP, at that time, there were a lot of the old families of Albany. And they really were not too welcoming. So they saw you as an outsider. So even though you're smart, you had to earn your way in.

So, the long and short of it is that, in writing for the paper, I got to learn about a lot of things. I could attend community meetings. And you start hearing about this report in 1987 about the incinerator and about how toxic this material was. There was actually was a study. Then, a lady by the name of Judy Enck, I think they were the ones that got the guy to release the study. But in short it hit the papers, and that was the first—

04-02:00:43

Eardley-Pryor: The Albany papers were talking about this ANSWERS facility?

04-02:00:46

Mair: Yeah, this was the *Times-Union* newspaper. There was an article written, and so that really tipped us off. And so, we worked in the Neighborhood Association, saying, "Hey, this is what's going on, and this is serious. We've really got to engage and try to inform the community about it." So, that was like the early wave. And again, I had no real deep skin in it because I'm still trying to do all these other things and situate myself in the community.

04-02:01:09

Eardley-Pryor: Were you still also enrolled in your doctoral program?

04-02:01:11

Mair: Oh, yeah. So, the long and short of it is that I'm on that intern salary and everything else. I'm doing all this other crazy stuff. And, so you're just getting sucked into all this other stuff. So the next thing I was concerned about was recreational programs for our daughters. And then we realized Arbor Hill, the

Black community, had no recreational infrastructure, parks. Affordable housing was being built on its open space.

And so, we saw that everything in the community was going in the wrong direction versus, if you're going to be trying to invest in this community, you wanted to go in the other direction. So we really got involved in a lot of grassroots environmental stuff—but not from the sense of environmental, but from civil rights and basically trying to build a community, trying to grow it from just being a disconnect—that marginalized low-income community—but really to be an upward, desirable place where a lot of urban professionals would want to come.

04-02:02:13

Mair:

Now, people would argue, “Were you arguing for gentrification?” I go, “Look, at that point in time, gentrification was a good thing because you had a lot of families that were under-employed, semi-employed, and just having young professionals coming in brought in new energy. And that’s how you got things going. It’s how you got Little Leagues going. It’s how you got new stores and entrepreneurs coming in. You’ve got to have a diversified base. If you were to do a normal distribution bell curve, this thing was skewed all the way to the left to poverty. And it was not anywhere in the middle where you can argue that gentrification was a problem.

04-02:02:50

Eardley-Pryor:

You told me before about something called the Field of Dreams program.

04-02:02:54

Mair:

Right. Well, that would come shortly. So, one of the issues was taking back open space. Because what happened was, when we were trying to get our kids enrolled in programs, we found out a lot of Black kids and children that were getting enrolled in programs, they were getting treated poorly because all the recreation that the city was reporting and providing for children were pretty much in the white neighborhoods in the city of Albany at that time.

So, African-American children had to go out of Arbor Hill, North Albany, and West Albany to these places. And when they're there, it was like you're going into their place and their space. And you were treated poorly. Kids were harassed. They were put on the bench. Their talents were not given equal access to at-bat and sports. And that happened to my daughter, and I said, “Listen, there’s got to be something better than this.” You see that, even recreational space, if it’s putting children at a disadvantage, you already saw the injustice in just using recreational space, that because you’re colored you were treated as second class.

04-02:03:53

Mair:

And that was worse than what I experienced as a kid of color in Westchester County. So, here I am in a city [Albany] with supposedly more diversity, and my children were getting access to less recreation than I did when I lived in

Westchester County, which really had a segregation problem, but it was not this bad. So that led us to say, again, this is that notion of “Do your own, build your own.”

And so, what happened was a group of like-minded parents, we decided—the movie *Field of Dreams* had come out, and we said, “Let’s build it, and they’ll come.” But before that happened, a tragedy occurred. And that tragedy essentially was a child was killed on the corner and left in a swing.

04-02:04:36

Eardley-Pryor: Wait, what?

04-02:04:36

Mair: A corner of Lark and Manning Boulevard, the corner of Lark and Manning Boulevard, a kid by the name of Elijah Willingham was killed. He was killed while playing an illicit game of gambling, craps, with drug lords. And what happened was the kid was winning, but you don’t walk away with a gang, with drug lord money in your pocket because you’re winning. They want their money back. And so, at the end of the day they ended up shooting the kid and killing the kid.

04-02:05:10

Eardley-Pryor: And leaving him in a swing?

04-02:05:10

Mair: Leaving him in the swing.

04-02:05:12

Eardley-Pryor: Of this park?

04-02:05:12

Mair: Of this park where it was supposed to be a Little League field. And so what happened was when this incident happened, my analytical mode went in to saying, “What’s going on here? How does this happen?” So we went down to the building. The building was crawling with human feces. The people were using it as a drug den, a shoot-up parlor, and a sex parlor. There was a lot of evil stuff going on.

You had this corner, and that’s when this incident happened. I realized that nobody was using the recreation. And then you talk with all the parents, they go, “Oh, no, you don’t go over to that park because your kids would get killed, or you can’t be over there. You’ll be attacked.” So the basketball courts and the youth park, even though they had all this stuff, this infrastructure there, it was in third-rate condition. It was not properly maintained. And the drug lords had taken over and used the building as their distribution point for crack cocaine and other drugs.

And so, what happens is little kids, they see these gangsters and hustlers having money and having the cars and having the clothes. They go over and

emulate them and hang out. And if they run into trouble and get killed, it's just a loss. But, the city was not doing anything about that. And I'd just built my house there. I'd just built my house literally one block away from where this kid just got killed.

04-02:06:32

Eardley-Pryor: With two daughters living in this house?

04-02:06:33

Mair: At the time, my third daughter had come.

04-02:06:37

Eardley-Pryor: And the third daughter—?

04-02:06:38

Mair: Is Maryam, is Mary. So, I had this infant and two daughters who needed recreation space. And I says, "This not good." So I organized with a group of fathers. We went down there, and we started to tear the building down. We took a direct action. The city pushed back and said—because basically, what was going on, we called in the press, and we called in the media. And we said, "Listen, we need"—it became a protest direct action for recreational space for kids.

Again, we were not connecting it to the environmental movement. We were not connecting it. To us, it still was a civil rights issue of separate and unequal facilities. And, my connection to the EJ [environmental justice] stuff did not come just yet. But the long and short of it is, we ended up negotiating an agreement that we would take back, and we would form those organizations, that infrastructure necessary to build the youth recreation space. And so, I'm fast-forwarding right now to the early nineties.

04-02:07:50

Eardley-Pryor: But that take-back of space happened in the eighties?

04-02:07:52

Mair: That take-back of space happened in the eighties, right. So, two things happened. We had the awareness—because all these things were simultaneously going on. We had an awareness about the pollution coming from the incinerator. We got a report, so you had the communities agitated, mobilizing about that. We had the struggle for affordable housing space and the right for people to be treated fairly in the law, and to create a diverse space where we would have a decent place to live. And then you want to enjoy that space and make sure your children had recreation. So we had to simultaneously engage that.

So, right about this time, a study comes out called *Toxic Wastes and Race*. It came out in '87, but it hit like a bomb. And this is where it's linking the fact that polluting facilities, environmental facilities, were being located and sited in urban communities, and regardless of your socioeconomic status. They

went back in time, found even these old Black communities were built on top of landfills, like in Jacksonville, Florida.

It took an incident down in North Carolina, where there was a PCB dump that was being built in a town in North Carolina. The residents and the church rose up to take a direct action because it actually, again, comes out of the church—the church being a central place of organizing, something that I could definitely relate to. The church has always been that second city hold, whether it was for my family or any other community. It's that place where people can come together and take action. And so, in short, this knowledge was hitting. We then had to study this knowledge about the ANSWERS incinerator hitting.

04-02:09:23

Eardley-Pryor: Wait. Just to piece this out, because this is important stuff, this is foundational work for you. So 1987 is when this toxic races and spaces report [*Toxic Wastes and Race* report] is released.

04-02:09:33

Mair: Yes, it hits out. It comes out like an atomic bomb.

04-02:09:35

Eardley-Pryor: And this is the first national-scale—

04-02:09:38

Mair: This is the first systematic analysis of how governments at all levels, from the federal all the way down to the local, handles hazardous waste—solid waste, polluting facilities, sewage treatment plants, all these things, whether we call them negative amenities—things that are essential for cities with how they deal and manage their waste, how they deal and manage their sewage. In the process of dealing with these things, they produce a lot of toxins and toxic byproducts. They produce a lot of odors. But more importantly, the dust and particulates can not only trigger asthma, in some cases, depending upon the composition, can be carcinogenic.

So this study, when it did that analysis—because first it was argued that, in North Carolina, that they were being—which led to a study called *Dumping in Dixie* by Dr. Robert Bullard—that this was happening because they were Black. And so, this study went out to find out whether that assertion was true. It was the systematic analysis. So, based upon an alert, based upon an action in North Carolina, an alarm went up.

United Church of Christ stepped in, United Church of Christ out of Harlem. So New York City once again comes through. Dr. Benjamin Chavis, Charles Lee, and a woman—who actually grew up [in Harlem] across the street from where I would go as a child, in what we called the Bad Air Fund, over at the Delano Projects—Vernice Miller-Travis, they were part of the pioneering effort supported by United Church of Christ, that did the analysis that showed that these conditions of the grimy, dirty, urban community was actually a

function of actual land-use policy linked to our governments, linked to our faulty or failing democracy, or democracies that did not treat people of color equally under the law, hence creating injustices—in this case environmental justice. And since it's codified and classified by race, it falls along the fault lines of race. Ben Chavis properly called it environmental racism.

04-02:11:41

Mair:

Me, being a systems thinker, this is—again, like I said how my mind was exploded when I was sitting at, how all that consciousness came together in the crucible of Binghamton. But then my systems thinking came together with this study. This was another dimension by which the civil rights that we were already—it was right there in front of my face, the environmental injustice with regards to the land use, and land use of park policy, whether kids have access to recreation, how houses were being built on parkland but only in the Black community. We had to go to white communities where we thought we were getting better recreation only to be treated, again, along the racial fault line, as second class. Our kids were treated poorly.

So, these things start to come together. And you say, “My God.” The civil rights struggle is not just fighting for voting rights, and not just fighting for jobs for Blacks, or fighting for—this is literally totally systemic. And that epiphany really drove my writings, and it drove my organizing within Arbor Hill. But it moved me exclusively from a traditional civil rights approach—that you see most Blacks to this day still in that space of dealing with the racism at the sociopolitical level of community—but really getting into even land use, getting into monuments, getting into public spaces, getting into those things—like I said, that goes into that intellectual capital—things that build that environment that allows a kid to thrive and really become a healthy, productive human being. And here, now I've built the house up here on this hill, this plateau. I now had to do an analysis from that study of what's the impact on my community and my children.

04-02:13:41

Eardley-Pryor: This is a great place to just take a quick break here.

(break in audio)

04-02:13:45

Eardley-Pryor: All right, Aaron. So, your analysis of being where you are and what's happening around you suddenly is—what do you do with that?

04-02:13:52

Mair:

Well, the thing is, my epiphany that I started to have, being a systems thinker, was that I'm starting to see that this inequality—my dad, most civil rights activists and others like them engaged—they looked at how racism hit them head on, the standard accommodations, employment. Folks were struggling so much just to have a wage and just to live as working class without the burden of racism, that they did not look at the leisure-time aspect. And how does

racism hit your leisure time? Even though, as a child, it hit me, and it hit our family because of what recreational spaces that we had.

Why did my family have to be on the Hudson River? Why couldn't my father afford to go to the other lakes? Because clearly, what he was living out, and to start, while we did see it, was the actual access to safer and cleaner open spaces. But this was the place where the African-American community felt safe, was along the Hudson River. And it's not just Peekskill. All up and down the Hudson River, people tend to gravitate to places where they were safe. And so, the safe places for people of color have often been in some of the most toxic and dirtiest places and spaces.

04-02:15:05

Mair:

And it wasn't until this [*Toxic Wastes and Race*] study came out that the epiphany went off, like I said, a bombshell in my head. And you see all these things. And so, then my mobilizing to helping create and work through the Arbor Hill Development Corporation, so you start going after creating corporate structures, and things to try to deal with a lot of these inequalities, and trying to expand other points of, not only in community engagement, but also community building.

04-02:15:39

Eardley-Pryor:

The Arbor Hill Development Corporation where we recorded [interview session three, yesterday], was this where this was born?

04-02:15:44

Mair:

That was one of the things that we organized and helped pull together, the community. So, you start taking it back. So, the issue of dealing with the issue not only of affordable housing, but even maintaining housing. So when we talk about infrastructure investment and infrastructure amenity improvement—so again, the living environment. Up until that point, I never thought of my environment as an environment. Growing up middle class, working class, you don't think about where you live as part of an environment.

Now, it's not the natural environment where it's all wooded, but it still is a form. Look at the condition of, say, suburbia. Why is it all green? Why is the roads manicured and maintained? Those environments are things that people seek to create. And they actually push their governments to create the green space. They put the zoning ordinances so that stuff like an incinerator is not put in their environment. They create use laws. They pass ordinances in the surrounding suburban areas that [when] you go into their park and you don't have a town sticker that you are a resident, the cops will ticket you or come up to you and ask you to leave. Or a resident can come up and ask you to leave or call the cops and eject you.

04-02:17:05

Mair:

So, it took the *Toxic Wastes and Race* stuff that you realized the depth and how pernicious this was across all levels. And being a systems thinker, then, like I said, just like that kid did, realizes that you had that an education deficit and that you have to catch up. There was so much that I had to do in so many directions. But I just had the energy to do it. I was in my twenties and then, hitting in my thirties, but I still had that energy and that fire just as I was driven in my earlier pursuits to just quest more knowledge. Now I was pushing for more action. And so, I got engaged on a ballot that's like a shotgun blast. In a lot of fronts, I was just starting to appear and show up for school issues and school board and zoning board issues relative to community.

And we first did an analysis—because that's when it dawned on me to check out, why was my wife not hired? And then, it allowed me to go back and look at the arrangements. And so, we did an analysis. Rather than just go out and say, "You didn't hire my wife because she was Hispanic or Black," I said, "Well, let me go out and find out what's going on."

So, I went out and found that they actually had a desegregation plan, that they were supposed to try to do affirmative action compliance, but they were saying that they could not find qualified minorities. And so, I knew that that wasn't true, but that still is—take that as the null hypothesis. So, we went out and tested that theory. So if you were to look at raw numbers, that they were increasing their raw-number hires of minorities, and they could actually post year-over-year-end that they're hiring three or four more minorities than they did the prior year, it looks like they're making progress.

04-02:18:46

Mair:

But then when you did a statistical regression analysis of looking at the rates of hiring of minorities vis-à-vis the rates of hiring whites and then looked at that as a whole equation, then you could test the thesis of whether or not these rates are both going up and, for the minorities, going up even higher. Or, if it's not the case, what is it doing? So, we actually found out that actually they were doing more year-over-year-end hiring overall of teachers. But if you were white, you were more likely to be hired. And if you were a person of color, it was actually an inverse relationship.

So, actually, while the raw numbers looked like they were going up, they were still hiring a larger raw number of whites. And so juxtaposing, using a bivariate regression model, we were able to show that. And we did a presentation at a school board here.

04-02:19:37

Eardley-Pryor:

When you say "we," are we talking Art Mitchell, Reggie Knox? Who's we?

04-02:19:42

Mair:

We was Arbor Hill Concerned Citizens, the neighborhood association. We formed a neighborhood association. We were starting to organize, and all of

us moved interchangeably. We're also the same people—Barbara Allen and all of us would also become part of a coalition with the white community called CARE, City of Albany Residents for Responsible Education, CARE.

And so it was armed with that analysis that—their issue was that amongst the white kids, there was something called the academically talented program. In the academically talented program, whites felt that their kids were being denied access to this program, and they were qualified. But the academically talented program, I also found that in Arbor Hill in the Black areas, it was the way by which white kids living within those communities were able to go out to a white school in the city of Albany.

So they actually had internal city segregation. And so, they were keeping Black kids in the Black area while having a pathway for white kids to go out using the academic talent. And then I was able to show with my model that while they were hiring larger numbers year-on-year-end, relative to the overall numbers it was actually an inverse relationship. So, when these two things hit, it was a lot of press coverage. It was a call to action.

04-02:21:04

Mair:

But what it also resulted in was I got called in by some of the city leaders, and they made me an offer. They asked me how much was I earning with the state and that I was good material for perhaps being groomed for administration within the school district and that they would facilitate me to get an administrator degree. And I told them, I said, "I'm actually enrolled in a program." They go, "Look, here's what you could possibly earn, hypothetically." And, it was my first time where you actually did some data analysis, and you struck a wound. And now the city was making you an offer that you supposedly couldn't refuse.

And so, what was interesting in that meeting, it was an individual who was a school board candidate as well as three seated school board members, superintendent of the city school district, and this African-American spokesman, Nate Quattlebaum, who was a committeeman, and he was speaking on behalf—he was doing the talking. So they had the legal ability to say they didn't say anything, and they didn't make a commitment. But Nate Quattlebaum, with these men in the room, was giving me some hypothetical scenarios by which my life could be well off.

04-02:22:18

Eardley-Pryor:

Do you think that was a genuine offer to get you involved?

04-02:22:20

Mair:

It was a bribe. It was a bribe. Let's be clear what it was. It was that critical moment where some Blacks, a number of Blacks, would often sell out the cause or sell out the struggle. And this is where a lot of poor-people movements, whether it's Black, white, blue or green, fail, because sometimes your economic situation—I was a young father. I'm struggling, and I could

have made my life a lot easier. But that was the first time I really realized my worth and value to the community—to the community—not to my own pocket.

So, I told them let me get back to them on it. But I asked them a lot more about, “Why didn’t my wife’s application...?” I said, “Listen, you want me?” I said, “What happened to my wife? She wanted to work.” And so, they actually had the principal and the individuals who supposedly received my wife’s application—and the personnel director was a fellow in the administration by the name of Joe Montamuro. And Mr. Montamuro said, “Look, your wife wasn’t hired because we felt that she would not stay. She was pretty much overqualified. She had two master’s degrees, and people like that, we’ve found on average, would not stay.”

04-02:23:35

Eardley-Pryor: That’s the same story they gave you for the house.

04-02:23:37

Mair: This is the same story that they gave me for the house. But this is the same story they give African-Americans who have any real credentials. So, one way that they deny you opportunity, and the way that the Republican sells it, is that you’re not qualified. You’re not trained. You’re not smart enough.

In fact, the President of the United States [Donald Trump] to this day gives the implication that Black people are dumb—even when you have a Harvard Law scholar like Barack Obama, he challenges, “How did he get into Harvard? He must have been affirmative action,” ignoring the fact that the guy was the editor of the *Harvard Law Review*. Trump did get into school, but it was his dad, and it wasn’t really an admission. And so, the guy with the shady credentials is criticizing those who earned them.

So it’s that paradox that follows my family through from South Carolina going forward. It’s that paradox that you find yourself up against. So, when they gave me that information, that was what really further made me commit. Again, it was how you fight and where you fight.

04-02:24:38

Mair: So, with that we really got to form a coalition, A, to overthrow the school board. And Barbara Allen—our partnership with the whites and building an alliance, we wanted a certain number of seats to be African-American. We selected Barbara Allen, who was a reporter with me at the *Scene* newspaper, to run. And so, again, it’s like, again, building movement but building power. And the long and short of it, based upon that analysis, that really rocked the community in its day.

In short, the CARE slate won. And one of the policy things that they implemented was the Citizen Desegregation Committee. I was appointed to it, and I think I was appointed to chair that. I have to go check my files, but in

short, that was one of the things we were on. And that was to dismantle the AT program, the academically talented program—but also deal aggressively to redress the issue of disparity, disparate hiring of minorities. So making sure what my wife went through would never happen to another person of color again.

04-02:25:41

Mair:

But all while that was going on, we were still fighting for safe recreational space, open space. We were also fighting for programs that actually brought services to the Arbor Hill neighborhood. So, we were fighting on this. So, this all requires that they have a strong active neighborhood association. And these things were very, very much a part of it.

So, the long and short of it is that one summer, our daughter [Marjana] started getting particularly ill. The air was always rancid. We knew it was the incinerator. But one particular era, one daughter got ill. So we took her to the pediatrician, and they go, “Do you have asthma in your family?” And we go, “No, we don’t have asthma.” They go, “We think your daughter might be asthmatic. Is there anything like particulates or allergens?” I go, “Well, it’s the incinerator.” So, Marjana was the first one that actually had a pediatric diagnosis of possible environmental asthma. And the other girls were developing respiratory issues. And, we knew it was the incinerator.

04-02:26:42

Mair:

I went out as Marjana got that diagnosis, and I went out to do what I do best, which is collect data and data analysis. So I went door to door, got a bunch of neighbors and members of the association. We went door to door, and we started taking analysis of kids that were coming down sick. And we also found that a number of kids were coming down with elevated blood lead levels in housing that was the new infill housing, as part of the affordable housing program.

04-02:27:09

Eardley-Pryor:

What does “new infill housing” mean?

04-02:27:10

Mair:

Housing built post-1975 without lead paint, so it’s modern construction. So kids should not be coming down with lead poisoning. And so, we were getting kids with lead poisoning, elevated asthma, and there were a lot of women with endometriosis. And also there were cases of chloracne in and around the Sheridan Hollow point. Chloracne is when you’re exposed to dioxin. So, we realized this plant was spewing more than particulates, that there was all these weird clusters of illness. So, we started digging in and trying to find out what the heck was going on.

04-02:27:49

Eardley-Pryor:

And this is just going door to door and saying, “What kind of health effects is your family having?”

04-02:27:52

Mair: This is going door to door. And so, what happened is we then began to mobilize. And that's when I met Mother Emily Grissom. I met her actually earlier in the eighties when I came. But when she and I became most closely aligned, because she was the president of Sheridan Hollow Neighborhood Association.

04-02:28:10

Eardley-Pryor: And where is Sheridan Hollow?

04-02:28:11

Mair: Sheridan Hollow is on the street on which the ANSWERS incinerator is built. Sheridan Hollow is the lowest point, one of the lowest points, in the city. It's in the hollow. The height to the south of Sheridan Hollow is Capitol Hill, where the capitol buildings are. And to the north is Dudley Heights. So, think of it as a hat. Put the incinerator down inside the bowl of the hat, the deep part of the hat. And then just look at the brim, and you would not see the top of the stack, but the smoke would just spill over the top of the brim.

Our houses were up on that brim in the prevailing north wind pattern. So, when I thought I was building my house near a recreational place and space, right perfectly in between two schools, I was putting my children in harm's way. In the case of my family, my ancestors and my family says, "God put you where He needed to put you." And so, I was going to be that David to take on that Goliath that would be the incinerator. And so, we began to systematically protest and demonstrate and organize against the incinerator throughout the early nineties.

04-02:29:17

Eardley-Pryor: And you had the data.

04-02:29:18

Mair: And we had the data. But that still wasn't enough. We would petition. We would go to city hall, went to city hall meetings. We would go to county health department, file complaints. But everybody was for the plant. Why? The plant brought anywhere from five to twelve million dollars in tipping fees to the city. Zero of those fees went to any recreational assets, amenities or any program for any of the children that were impacted or in the community of color where the plant was burdening with its output.

We were using *Toxic Wastes and Race*, and we were calling it environmental racism. "Why is the governor and the city engaging in environmental racism?" We were challenging them. So, one of the things that we linked up when I was on the council of Albany, I got elected president of the [Arbor Hill] neighborhood association, and as president you get to sit on the Council of Neighborhood Associations, CONA's board.

And so, what happened was I linked up with a guy by the name of Chris Mercogliano of the Mansion Hill neighborhood. And Chris Mercogliano is the

founder of the Free School along with a bunch of other radicals. So, the Free School is like this hippie commune type of organizing. They actually tried to get me to come over there. They said, “We need you to live over here,” and they really did. It’s like, when you’ve got a ball of fire and a ball of energy, you want to put that thing in your heater and get it on your side of town.

04-02:30:32

Mair:

And they brought me over there. They wanted me to teach at the Free School. I go, “Well, I don’t have any certification.” They go, “That’s no problem. Come on over. You’ve got this knowledge. We want you here.” But anyway, Chris Mercogliano, we also found numerous places and cases, which we collaborated on, of activism that would actually benefit both working-class communities.

And so, one year, one evening, in 1992, we decided that the next big upset of the incinerator, we were going to do like they did in—the Tet Offensive was really important in Vietnam. I actually borrowed the strategy. It’s called *giải phóng*. *Giải phóng* is the Vietnamese word for general uprising. And that was the rallying cry behind the Tet Offensive in which they all rose up in all of the cities, and they hit every place at once. They knew they were going to lose, but the art was not warfare. It was the politics and optics going after the media warfare. And if the media in the world could perceive that the big superpower is losing, it was enough to demoralize and have them disengage.

04-02:31:31

Mair:

So taking from the Tet Offensive strategy of *giải phóng*, I said, “Well, look, we’ve got to have the uprising, because the plant’s always spewing ash. It covers everything. Our kids can’t go out in the summer. And in the winter, they’ve got black snow.” At the next iteration, we timed it for the next fresh snow. And, we said when it happens, we had a phone chain, and we would all go out, and we would call the press. We’d have a snap press event.

04-02:32:11

Eardley-Pryor:

That was the moment, the snowfall?

04-02:32:13

Mair:

That was the moment of the great snowfall. And that snowfall came, and the plant had an unusual upset. So it was almost like we had organized this thing, and it’s like there’s nothing more perfect than to have an event happen, and you’re perfectly ready for that moment in time, and you’re organized. And we had planned, and it went like clockwork. And so, the plant was just really spewing out black gunk. And it was just going all over the city, all over the Arbor Hill.

Miss [Emily] Grissom gave the first call to me. I called Chris Mercogliano, and Chris and them went outside and says, “Good God, the black stuff is coming down.” And they sent runners over just to see. I said, “Go out and see how far and wide, because we need to do the width of the bandwidth, and

where it was falling and where it was not.” So, we realized that it was actually falling this time on the state education center, which was actually a little bit west of the mansion, which meant that the governor’s mansion was being covered as well.

So we called the press that evening, and they were out with us as the plant was having the upset and what have you. So, what ended up happening was, the press was covering it by the time of their 11:00 news during the heavy snowfall. But the plant was still going and having an incomplete burn. And so, the morning, I think a couple of the news stations got smart enough, and they sent up a helicopter. They paid for a helicopter to fly over. And they realized they took this picture a big, black swath going from the ANSWERS incinerator all the way down outside Albany County out to Glenmont, New York. That’s how far south this went.

04-02:33:51

Mair:

So, it gave a visual representation of this toxic soot. And immediately OGS’ [New York State’s Office of General Services] response was that, “No, it’s nothing. It’s nothing but PAH, poly-aromatic hydrocarbons. It’s the same stuff that’s on the hamburger on the grill at McDonald’s or Wendy’s”—so, if you worry about eating McDonald’s or Wendy’s, you never want to eat after God gave you the image that this is what’s on your hamburger that you get at a fast food stop—“and it’s very common.” But he said, “You would have to eat a dump truckload of it to reach any level of toxicity.”

04-02:34:22

Eardley-Pryor:

And who’s OGS?

04-02:34:23

Mair:

Office of General Services. This is the entity who was responsible for the day-to-day operations. It was their staff, Office of General Service staff, that ran the incinerator, that ran the power plant, that ran the steam plant, electrical generation. They’re like the utility of the state. OGS is the utility, the public utility, of the state that ran this. And so, they immediately classified—they contacted the Department of Health, and they classified it as non-carcinogenic and that it was okay and safe. But, we knew that it wasn’t.

So we really banged on the drum. Residents scooped it up. They froze it. We told people to keep samples of it because we need to test it. So, this was the other thing, because a lot of times people react to an action, but they don’t take evidence. So, we want to fingerprint it. I says, “Listen, every plant, every combustion has its own DNA just like human DNA, its unique signature. Let’s get samples.” We told neighbors to collect samples and freeze them.

And so, what happened was we were able to get them to wildlife pathologist Ward Stone. The reason why that’s important, because Ward Stone, he oversaw, through Five Rivers [Environmental Education Center], a program that connected Tivoli Park, the preserve that we built our house near, with

Five Rivers, because they were outdoor. It was an urban environmental preserve, and the flora and fauna were supposed to be monitored by Five Rivers. And he was the chief wildlife pathologist that worked at Five Rivers. And so, Tivoli fell under his authority to use state dollars to test any environmental risk.

04-02:36:03

Eardley-Pryor: So, Ward Stone was a state—

04-02:36:05

Mair: State worker. Dr. Ward Stone, he was a wildlife environmental pathologist.

04-02:36:11

Eardley-Pryor: Did he work for DEC [New York State Department of Environmental Conservation]?

04-02:36:12

Mair: He worked for Department of Environmental Conservation. So, here's the layers of government. OGS ran the incinerator. Public Health was responsible for the occupational health aspects, so making sure that it's compliant and not a threat or risk to human health. DEC was responsible for making sure that it was not a threat to flora and fauna and wildlife species. And specifically they had a mandate with regards to Tivoli Preserve.

Now, make sure that this gets into the archives because that's why you will see I will provide to you the Tivoli plan. You'll see that DEC's role is inside that, because what they tried to go after Dr. Stone later on, after he did the tests and independent analysis and came forward and didn't lie, they tried to fire him. And so, they went after him to silence him. And thank God the other piece of this was that we had organized and got the press and media involved.

And so, the media engagement and the media involvement was very, very essential, because we had to write lucid press releases. We had to get out the data. But we also had to have the independent sources, because naturally passionate parents, organizers, you're going to be viewed as biased. And you can't really claim 100 percent certainty without the scientific evidence.

04-02:37:36

Eardley-Pryor: So, Dr. Ward Stone came forward and said, "Here's the data."

04-02:37:37

Mair: Dr. Ward Stone did the first analysis of that soot that came out of that belching. If this was an indicator or an index marker, then whatever the text results suggest, then you can multiply that times 365 days a year, and for the number of years since 1981 after the incinerator was operating. That can give you an idea of the tonnage and the magnitude of what the community has been dealing with, with regards to hazardous toxic waste.

04-02:38:08

Eardley-Pryor: That's a hugely important thing.

04-02:38:09

Mair: This is a thing. And this is where my analysis is framing it, so people can get that. And as that argument was being advanced, they knew they had somebody out there that knew what he was doing. And so, when somebody's saying, "Fingerprint, chemical signature," this was sending the higher-ups the willies. But the point of the matter is, we did not have the testing. So as long as we did not have data, whatever the state said, the press was going with, because it was then the Health Commissioner was saying "It's okay. You can eat a dump truckload of it."

04-02:38:44

Eardley-Pryor: They were the scientific authority.

04-02:38:45

Mair: They were the scientific authority. So, when Dr. Stone tested it and finally got the data back, that's when we had the full evidence. And we got the data back in the January, I want to say—I might be off a year, this is where I'm conflating right now because I should have my notes, either '92 or '93—'92 I believe it was. So, it was just before the Martin Luther King holiday—the Martin Luther King holiday and march.

The governor always marched to the capitol where we celebrate the Martin Luther King Day. And that's one of the things I love. My daughters, some of their early brochures, they actually made the cover, my young daughters, Heba and Marjana, marching. So, they always marched in the Martin Luther King. But this is the one time that they were not going to march in the Martin Luther King, and they were upset. Because we were standing at the top of the hill, and it was cold, and the governor and everybody was down at the bottom of the hill, and they were going to march up to the capitol.

My daughters said, "We want to go down there and march. Come on, Daddy." But we were at the top of the hill with a bunch of families from the neighborhood, Arbor Hill Concerned Citizens, Sheridan Hollow Neighborhood Association, as well as Mansion Hill. We were all amassed at the top, because we said if he's going to come up, we want to hit him, to have him face sick children, sick family members that are basically the victims of the ANSWERS incinerator, because now we had the data. And we want to ask when's he going to shut it down.

04-02:40:01

Eardley-Pryor: So, instead of marching with him, you said, "You're marching to us."

04-02:40:04

Mair: We're going to use this day of civil disobedience and the spirit of Dr. King to engage in, as they would say, nonviolent resistance. And that was what the point was. We were going to block the governor. And the governor would

have had to have gone through the optics of state police and them pushing and knocking us down like in the Selma bridge march, where you seen them pushing and knocking down John Lewis. We were prepared for that moment, and there was a lot of media already in place.

04-02:40:38

Eardley-Pryor: This is in the wake of you having the scientific data?

04-02:40:41

Mair:

Yeah. This is in the wake of us having the data. We already knew what the data was. And, the data was not publicly released because they had it, but Ward Stone, he released the data that said, "Hey, this stuff had dioxins. It had mercury. It had lead and a whole host of others." He had a whole—and it was bad. It was bad news. Plus, incomplete-burn number 2 oils, so the combustion was not only the incinerator. What happened was the incinerator broke down. And so, what happened is the oil generator then kicked in. So on top of that, it broke down.

So, you had the fly ash from the incinerator come and coat everybody. And then the gook of incomplete number 2 crude oil that was burned, coating on top of it, so making that stuff like a lacquer on top of the ash. So, it kind of preserved it but added to the toxic stew, because it would be what people would be inhaling if they were outside or on any given day.

So, that whole toxic stew, he had the signature and fingerprint. And he knew there was enough—the fact that there were dioxins there, it played into the fact that people were having chloracne. So, now here's something that you know that's connected with the chloracne there.

04-02:42:06

Eardley-Pryor: And you knew that because you'd gone door to door.

04-02:42:08

Mair:

Because we were going door to door. So, we had issues that the people on the ground had faced. In fact, Commissioner Oorling at that time, who was the commissioner of OGS, he was doing his best to try to backpedal and minimize it. But the long and short of it is that they were assembled to come up. They could see us up there. And there was a group of press that was up there. And so, the press was in communication with one another.

In short, a press person came up and said, "Listen, they're canceling the Martin Luther King Day march. The weather is too bad. The governor is going to go directly from the SUNY Central, which is on the Hudson River, right down at the lower State Street. And they're going to go ride up by car to the convention center. They're going to skip the march."

The first time that the Martin Luther King march was ever canceled, and we believe it was because the governor did not want the political image and

showdown of him marching into residents in the wake of this incinerator upset.

04-02:43:07

Eardley-Pryor: Which governor is this, Cuomo?

04-02:43:08

Mair: This was Governor Mario Cuomo.

04-02:43:09

Eardley-Pryor: Elder Cuomo?

04-02:43:10

Mair: This is the elder Cuomo. And so, the press came up running to us and asked us, "Hey Aaron, what are you guys going to do?" And I said, we were kind of stuck. We were kind of flat-footed. And then, the guy goes, "Well, from what we understand, the governor is going to come up to the convention center and go through the narrow corridor. Are you guys going to meet him there?"

And so, I turned and I go, "Of course, that's exactly what we're going to do. We know." And so, it's one of those things where you were asked a leading question, and in being asked the leading question you were given the intelligence of exactly what the governor was going to do. No, the press person did not tell us to go there and say, "This is where the governor is going to be at, and this is where you want to hit him at." But, in asking, the way the question was framed, we learned of the intelligence of the exact route of the governor.

And so, we managed to get as many of the family, elderly in their wheelchairs, over to that corridor. And the way the corridor was designed, it was so narrow that thirty to forty people would look like three to four hundred people. That's how it was. And we were jammed in. And the way the chairs were, and the kids with the strollers, it just was impassable. So, by the time that Governor Cuomo comes up, he and I met face to face. And so, there's the video footage, I believe, with the CBS and the NBC affiliate, of Cuomo and I engaging in a face-to-face.

04-02:44:33

Eardley-Pryor: What did you tell him?

04-02:44:34

Mair: Well, I told him, "You've got to clean up. People are dying. They're sick. This is environmental racism." And I said, "People have known this." I says, "There's been a study out, and it's been sited in the Black community. Our children are sick and suffering. We've been complaining."

He asked me, he goes, "Did you go to the commissioner? Did you talk to the supervisor? Did you put"—as if this something was new or this incident just happened. I said, "Governor, this has been occurring every day since I lived in

this community.” And I said, “And more importantly, it’s been going on since 1981.” I told him of the study that was done, that was released and circulated in the community, that they discovered then that the plant was basically a hazard.

04-02:45:13

Eardley-Pryor: In ’87?

04-02:45:14

Mair: In ‘87 there was a study released. And so, I said, “Now with this data,” I said, “We now know that nothing has changed.” And I says, “Our children are sick.” I said, “Our property’s being destroyed,” because the way—in the cold season, the sulfur dioxide becomes sulfuric acid when it’s cold. And because the plant doesn’t complete burns, it’s really concentrated. So we took pictures of street signs and houses within the bandwidth of the incinerator cloud. All the paint was etched off, bleached or peeled off.

I put Marine Spar Varnish on my deck door, clear-coat Marine Spar, which is what you put on boats, because I figured that that would resist the sulfuric gas, the sulfur dioxide, which becomes sulfuric acid, that that would be more of a resistant. It peeled the Marine Spar Varnish off my deck door. It pitted my deck. It pitted my car. And my car wasn’t the only one. All the cars that were within that bandwidth, north and south. So there’s physical evidence.

We had that all that evidence, and we’re saying, “Hey, listen, you’ve got to shut it down.” And so, the governor said that, look, he’ll meet with the mayor. And we demanded to be at the table. We did not want them to meet without the community. We wanted to be there.

04-02:46:38

Eardley-Pryor: And you had the whole community behind you.

04-02:46:39

Mair: And we had the whole community behind us.

04-02:46:40

Eardley-Pryor: Kids in strollers? The optics are amazing.

04-02:46:42

Mair: So, the governor agreed to meet, and we said, “Well, sir, if you meet and you find out that this is poisoning us, will you shut it down?” And he said, “I will”—he indicated. I don’t think he said directly, but he indicated that he would take aggressive action if the data bore out that it was indeed something that they could not mitigate or stop. They would shut it down.

So, the long and short of it was that they were having a meeting with Jerry Jennings, and then that’s when the data that Ward Stone had, we called up Ward and said, “Ward, what are you going to do?”

04-02:47:16

Eardley-Pryor: Who's Jerry Jennings?

04-02:47:17

Mair:

Jerry Jennings was the mayor of the city of Albany. So, Ward said, "I'm going to meet them. I'll meet you over at city hall." So, Ward actually drove over to city hall. And when they were having that meeting, Ward came over with a bunch of data and the reporters. And we interviewed on the city steps. And Ward gave them the data and copies of the report. And, one reporter says, "Hey, isn't this supposed to be released through your PAO [Public Affairs Officer]?" He goes, "Look, I'm a scientist, and this is the public data. The public pays for this. I'm releasing the data."

And that's when they went after Ward for unauthorized release of data. But, they tried to get him on a number of things—that it not only was unauthorized release of data, but also that it wasn't his job to go out and do the testing, it was the health department or whatever. And that's when he says, "No, Tivoli Park, Tivoli Preserve, is within the prevailing wind pattern of this. And this is the material that's falling in Tivoli Park. And I'm well within my authority to do this."

04-02:48:13

Mair:

And he was. And he absolutely was. And so, that data was pivotal. So, Ward came back to me and says, "Aaron, we need to get more data." And he says, "I need to get samples." I says, "Well, Ward, they don't shut the incinerator up. You and I can go in there." And so, during that winter, during the Battle of Data, Ward spent the winter to spring under investigation and under attack. But eventually he was able to survive.

04-02:48:42

Eardley-Pryor: What year was this, still '92/'93?

04-02:48:43

Mair:

This is '93, '92/'93, that '92—

04-02:48:50

Eardley-Pryor: Winter to—

04-02:48:51

Mair:

Winter/spring, '92/'93. So, Ward was still under attack. But that spring we said, when it's spring he and I would go out on a mission in warm weather to get samples from inside the incinerator. So, Ward and I, at about 11:00 pm to about 2:00 in the morning, he and I went out taking soil samples from in and around the incinerator and into Arbor Hill.

Ward had all the kits. He had all the methods because he had to handle it. He told me, "This is what I need you to do. Hold the flashlight. I will handle everything. I don't want you to touch anything because I don't want to"—

because he would have to report that I touched it. And I could have easily dropped something. So, he says, "I'll take it."

So we went to the incinerator, man. And, we went inside because the place was so dirty, and the air was so thick with ash, that they had to open up the doors and vent it into the community at night, which the community knew about. It was one of the sources of lead around the houses there. So, Ward was literally taking ash, raw ash, right off the street. And so, since the incinerator main doors were open, he was able to walk right up to the burner itself and scoop right there from the—get fly ash right from the burner itself. So, he got different grades of fly ash also from the halls inside of the incinerator plant and soil.

04-02:50:07

Eardley-Pryor: All the way out into the community?

04-02:50:08

Mair:

And he went out in the community. In fact, what was really funny was Ward Stone and I got stopped by the police because he was on my shoulder. We were climbing up over the fence to get into a grassy knoll area where he could—and so, the cops came up, and they thought I was selling dope, because he was a white guy in Arbor Hill. They're like, "What are you doing here?" And they thought they had—and so he had to pull out his [identification] cards. They thought that, okay, it's not the first time they had a state official, Dr. Stone, with credentials that's strung out on drugs [but Ward Stone was not on drugs, and we were not doing anything illegal.]

So, long and short of it, about three cop cars pull up. And so, after a while they figured out we were doing what we were doing, and then they let us go. But they detained us for about a half an hour, investigated. Ward, to this day, he laughs about the fact that he got stopped by the police. I will make sure you get Ward's information so you can call him and talk about he and I collecting samples and him getting stopped with me by the police.

In fact, he really had a hard time because I was pointing and using the words "environmental racism." And Ward really bristled. He was like one of those white males. And at that time, just that fragile—because racism implies an intentionality. And he had not crossed that threshold yet.

04-02:51:33

Eardley-Pryor: To see the systemic aspects?

04-02:51:34

Mair:

But eventually he got there when he saw the response, when he saw how the community was treated. And that's what really broke his heart. That's really what threw him in to say, "I'm going to do my job even if it costs me my job. But I'm here to serve the people." And he just saw that the state was really

circling the wagons to cover itself and protect itself from liability. So, he got all those test results, and he published those results.

And, that's when we had to go out and organize to get some serious data, because now that we had the winter data, we had the spring ash data, and we now knew it was hazardous waste, we now had to up our game. And my father always said that if you're going to take on an institution, you had to become an institution. That means you had to find institutional allies, because now you're facing big costs. This is like the labor movement. So, you liked to have the union strike fund to feed the families for a big strike but also prepare for litigation. So, my dad's advice came in handy because that's when I said, "Well, look, we're going to need to get allies."

And that's when I decided at that juncture I needed to reach out to environmental organizations like NYPIRG [New York Public Interest Research Group], Sierra Club, and that began me knocking on doors, which led me to knock on the door of the Sierra Club.

Interview 5: November 15, 2018

05-00:00:01

Eardley-Pryor: This is Roger Eardley-Pryor from the Bancroft Library's Oral History Center at UC Berkeley, and we are here for the final oral history interview session with Mr. Aaron Mair, the fifty-seventh president of the Sierra Club. We are back at the Sierra Club headquarters, the Atlantic chapter, in Albany, on Broadway.

05-00:00:18

Mair: In Arbor Hill.

05-00:00:19

Eardley-Pryor: In Arbor Hill. And today is November 15, [2018]. Aaron, last you and I spoke, yesterday, we were about to get to your first initial entry point with the Sierra Club, your first contact with them.

But, in the midst of all this work that you were doing on the ANSWERS project, there's a ton of other things that you're engaged in and active in. And so, I'd like to step back a little bit to put some of the ANSWERS work in context with other things you're working on.

05-00:00:46

Mair: Exactly.

05-00:00:47

Eardley-Pryor: One of the big things was, you're already working on an environmental justice campaign. And in the meantime, you entered the national—

05-00:00:57

Mair: It wasn't really an environmental justice [campaign], it was an environmental campaign. It was an incident that—not until the People of Color summit [the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit], as I say, really pulled into the environmental justice [movement].

Remember that “environmental justice” as a term and technology, these were being raised conceptually within the *Toxic Wastes and Race* study. But it's not until after the People of Color summit in October of 1991 that the terms of environmental justice, the principles of environmental justice, were formed.

05-00:01:30

Eardley-Pryor: So, were you not thinking of your work against the ANSWERS facility as environmental justice work?

05-00:01:35

Mair: I actually was viewing it in the frame and the lens as a civil rights action. And, see, this is the powerful piece that environmental justice moves in and brings into the environmental space. So, when we look at the environmental movement as a movement, which is a blend of civil rights action, and this begins with the action at Storm King Mountain in the Hudson River Valley.

05-00:01:59

Eardley-Pryor: Back in '65?

05-00:02:00

Mair:

Back in '65. And so, what was happening in 1965, it was the height of the civil rights struggle. And when the vanguards of that civil rights movement were people of color, they were taking it to the streets. They were pushing back and resisting against all the forms of institutional racism and pushing for civil rights and voting rights. They realized that their humanity was being stripped away because they did not have the political power to reset the laws to fully include them into civil society. So, to do that they had to regain their voting rights.

And also, once you gain that voting and political power, you can then set the table on your civil rights. And as they had that power, then people, political parties, will then start to adjust their laws and make the accommodations. So, they're very, very powerful movement points. And, all movements were modeling on it.

They were seeing the power of nonviolent, direct action led by Dr. Martin Luther King. But they also had Stokely Carmichael and SNCC as well as a whole bunch of other organizations using the violent method, the direct confrontation, the Malcolm Xes, who were saying, "The Christians are about turning their cheek, but we're not going to turn any cheeks."

05-00:03:12

Eardley-Pryor: "The Ballot or the Bullet."

05-00:03:13

Mair:

And so, you saw that powerful dialectic playing out, and whites were observing this. And they were seeing the effectiveness of this. And so, the notion of being militant—and you had the Vietnam War going on. So, all the stuff was hitting the fan. So, the environmental movement, as it engaged, and as people and activists started to organize safe places and spaces like Storm King—in which Consolidated Edison wanted to shave off the top—they actually borrowed civil rights tactics.

So, you actually saw in the real sense the fusion of civil rights tactics—and civil disobedience and direct engagement in litigation that was already in full view and play in the civil rights movement—now being adopted by the environmentalists. And then once they see that power, once they see those gains, you start seeing the foundation of an Earth Day [in April 1970]. So, the Earth Day is like a summit where we're going to set aside this day. And then people at that point in time start to define the modern environmental place and space. And then, naturally, they start pulling in the tools of activism.

In fact, Saul Alinsky's *Principles and Rules for Radicals* became a very [powerful] organizing principle, too. In fact, the Sierra Club organizing

manual [*Sierra Club Movement Organizing Manual, revised 2016; formerly the Sierra Club Grassroots Organizing Training Manual*] is right off of Saul Alinsky's work. And Saul Alinsky was a critical activist and leader and scholar in how to engage—and directly engage—and build power in grassroots population in a way that they can make really meaningful change.

05-00:04:44

Eardley-Pryor: Those points are essential. But chronologically, it's not until 1991 that the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit happens. So, what's happening for those twenty years [after Earth Day in 1970]?

05-00:04:55

Mair: What's happening within those twenty years, remember, Dr. King was assassinated. There was two things going down. When he was in Memphis, it was a labor action because it was sanitation workers fighting for a fair wage, a decent wage. They were getting a sense. And, there was an issue where worker safety and occupational safety—and this was, again, garbage trucks. The Blacks were in the back and loading the garbage. The white guys drove the truck. And eventually, during a bad rainstorm, two guys were inside the truck, as they always had done. And somehow the mechanism that packs and compresses the garbage activated, and they were killed. And this led to a direct job action.

What was missing from that study is that, to this day, the very community where they were hauling the garbage, and the landfills right there in that Memphis area, is some of the most toxic and hazardous sites. You had Dow Chemical, all these petrochemicals with regards to pesticides for farming were being manufactured. So, these men and their families were already living in some of the most toxic hazardous waste sites, which are not remediated to this day, in Memphis. So, not only were they fighting for their civil rights, their labor rights, but also the issue is even about the clean environment. In fact, it was sanitation workers that the civil rights movement, in the form of Dr. King, came to speak to that as part of the Poor People's Campaign.

05-00:06:25

Mair: So, one can actually say that that cycle had already been percolating and brewing within the civil rights movement. But, it was cast in the broader arc of civil rights laws and legislation and action and accommodation. It was not teased out specifically—not until the *Toxic Wastes and Race* study and not until North Carolina, and again, the church stepping in. Again, Dr. King was a preacher. He was like Zion McKenzie.

This pattern of the church being the point where people reached a boiling point, this is the place where they come together. And it's from that church that they organize and step into that space for action. So, that same pattern again—the church again—in North Carolina with regards to the PCB landfill and dump, which then triggers a direct resistance; and then triggers a government response in which they say, "Yeah, there is something here;"

which then triggers the United Church of Christ to go out and say, “Well, wait a minute. Let’s see what the bigger pattern is. Let’s look at all hazardous waste, and let’s look at all these things, and let’s stratify by race and income.”

And out comes this very powerful analysis that then starts to link that pattern of outcomes from what they call a failing democracy, but specifically a democracy that fails people of color based upon race, color, creed—so indigenous Americans, African-Americans, Hispanics. What you find is that this is another area in which the dynamics of racism plays out. So, in the case of discretionary choices to where you’re going to put a hazardous landfill, or where you’re going to site a very dangerous production facility—meaning you may get commodities out of it, but the byproducts of combustion and processing and making and manufacturing, whether it’s automobile oil processing, oil refinery—

05-00:08:21

Eardley-Pryor: Or energy at the ANSWERS plant.

05-00:08:22

Mair: And in this case, new energy by burning garbage at the ANSWERS plant. You site these things right within a minority community. So, this [*Toxic Wastes and Race*] study comes out in 1987. And a report comes out in the city of Albany at the same time. It’s about the conditions of the [ANSWERS] plant. We’re experiencing direct exposure. We’re having the particulates on our cars. I buy a home, and I’m in the prevailing wind pattern of this incinerator. So, all at the same time, I am actually seeing it.

And I get a document. This is all happening dynamically. So, I’m getting documents and looking at information. It’s helping me as a scholar, as an intellectual, who has a systems theorist mind. I’m coming in with my Immanuel Wallerstein, my big systems processes. And so, I’m connecting these dots dynamically in my mind. So, as a scholar, as an intellectual, I have the means to process and synthesize these documents and this information coming in. And then, also, coming from my military background, how to organize and pull together people to talk about tactics and actions and mobilizing people. So, these tools are coming together at the same point in time.

And then you have this People of Color summit.

05-00:09:35

Eardley-Pryor: How did you hear about it?

05-00:09:36

Mair: Well, when the *Toxic Wastes and Race* study came out, you start to follow the players, and you start to look at all the names, because then you learn about other places and locations. And so, there’s a bibliography within it, so you’ve got these names. And these people at that time are really hitting the ground.

But the Congressional Black Caucus was holding hearings. The Congressional Black Caucus and other political leaders were actually starting to highlight this information.

05-00:10:02

Eardley-Pryor: In the wake of the *Toxic Wastes and Race* study?

05-00:10:05

Mair: Well, remember, before that, you had the incident in '85 in North Carolina. So, there was a lot of reaction. And I believe the federal government—OSHA, or one of them—did an analysis and study about a specific set of hazardous waste landfills. And they asked them specifically—Congress asked the executive branch specifically to investigate whether or not race mattered. And what they found, that overwhelmingly in those four cases or those four points, that race *did* matter, which then triggered the broader study, the broader national analysis—

05-00:10:48

Eardley-Pryor: Charles Lee's document [*Toxic Wastes and Race* report].

05-00:10:48

Mair: —which Dr. Charles Lee did. And I want to say why this is important, because when we talk about the first People of Color summit, it speaks to the diversity of a whole group of people—poor whites, Asians, Native Americans, Hispanics and, yes, absolutely a lot of African-Americans, because the history of racism is around the condition and disposition of African-Americans. So, they were disproportionately, out of all groups, really bearing the brunt and the burden.

But the point of movement building, at the point of movement, it was that diverse expertise of brothers and sisters and genders that really were contributors. Because Vernice Miller-Travis, African-American female out of Harlem, battling a sewage treatment plant—and, again, gravity is uphill up at Harlem Heights. But Wall Street, where the sewage treatment plant should have been, did not get the sewage treatment plant because, again, the wealth is at the lower end of Manhattan. The poor people are up in the heights of Manhattan. So, all of a sudden, because of race, you have a sewage treatment plant pumping sewage uphill to a Black community. So, you had a very powerful, brilliant sister who was one of the researchers into toxic waste.

So, you literally had a people of color and people's movement participating and pulling out this study. But, as it came together and culminated in October in Washington, DC, 1991, you had a huge gathering. And, at that point, everybody's now comparing notes. And so, you go from your individual incidents, and dots and data points in that study and from around the country, to now you're all coming together. And now, you have a movement.

05-00:12:32

Mair: A movement is at the point in which everybody recognizes that you've got a common frame of reference, a common thread, a common set of institutions that are engaging in political behavior, or legislative behavior or actions, or regulatory behaviors. And you are on the receiving end collectively because of your non-white status. And so, the EJ [Environmental Justice] Principles that came out of this were very, very powerful indexing points. Up until that point, you really have the incidents. And after that, you have a movement, because now everybody's coming together. There's a meeting of the minds.

05-00:13:10

Eardley-Pryor: Pause just for a second.

(break in audio)

05-00:13:12

Eardley-Pryor: Why were those [Environmental Justice] Principles important?

05-00:13:16

Mair: Two points. It galvanized. It's the first consensus document of people from all over the country, from all backgrounds, agreeing that these are the key points that we all affirm and stand on. It's a very powerful point where a group of people—just like the Declaration of Independence, when you have that consensus document, it's a “We, the people” moment. And this was a “We, the people of color” moment. It's a very powerful statement. It's a very powerful document. It is our declaration for justice.

And what really was critical: the things and actions that we would expect of the nation as they dealt with our communities. And so, these were, as they say, points by which, in talking to the federal government, state government, environmental movement, and any of the actors that engaged in the environmental space and the civil rights space as it related through the environment to us, these were foundational points. And what they were, they were not separation. They were basically points that basically declared that we have the right to equal protection under the law. Our humanity had the right to be respected, period, full stop.

And so, these principles affirmed our connection to Mother Earth. They affirmed our human right, civil right, to clean air, clean water and clean soil. And these are very powerful points and starting points. Because up until then, a lot of regulation and regulatory agencies—polluters can load the air with whatever they want or load the water and the soil. They had regulations that allowed them to discharge things and put things out there. But what we're saying is, no, we have a fundamental—as human beings, a human right to clean air, clean water and soil.

05-00:15:05

Mair: And that was a very powerful position that if adopted straight up by the federal government, it meant a hell of a lot for the regulatory and regulated

community. They saw this as a major fiscal and real threat—more so than the environmental movement. Because the environmental movement, the mainstream movement, was playing within the wheelhouse of allowing EPA regulations, allowing the various agencies to do their thing and, as they say, regulate industry according to rules that they have set up with the US Chamber of Commerce. And so, therefore, to interfere with corporations that were polluting and discharging and burning garbage, you were interfering with their right of commerce and their right to make wealth.

And all of a sudden here's this thing that comes along and says, "Not at the expense of people's health." So, in other words, when you take a civil right, it's not just Black rights or Hispanic rights or Native American rights. You extrapolate that to the whole population. So, that means that even by pursuing justice for us, you pursue justice for all.

05-00:16:12

Mair:

All of a sudden, just like Love Canal gave us RCRA [Resource Conservation and Recovery Act] and gave us CERCLA [Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, also known as Superfund] and gave us the EPA, we now hit another revolutionary moment within the environmental movement where a deeper protocol of protection is linking to actual constitutional, civil and human rights. And that's a very powerful intersectional point. And that's why the civil rights movement and environmental movement linking this particular point and index is very, very powerful.

05-00:16:50

Eardley-Pryor:

And also, looking at—time-wise, around that same time—you are also calling for redistricting within Albany.

05-00:16:58

Mair:

Exactly.

05-00:16:58

Eardley-Pryor:

There's democratic awakening.

05-00:17:00

Mair:

Exactly. Well, see, these things all fit together. So, as I'm going through this transfer, I'm recognizing the vulnerability of our population and receiving incinerator ash and garbage being burned, and our community becoming the sphincter for an eight-county region. The way that we got there was because of our lack of political power, the fact that we did not have representatives or people in the regulating community to articulate our views, our wishes, and our concerns so that we would not be burdened. In fact, it was because of political disorganization and lack of political power due to both race and poverty that our community became vulnerable. And this is only curable through a representative and a healthy democracy.

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Eardley-Pryor: So, what did you do to fix that?

05-00:17:53

Mair: So, what we did was that we saw that this was coming right—the census had been taken.

05-00:17:59

Eardley-Pryor: In 1990?

05-00:18:00

Mair: In 1990. And they were actually now finishing up the full population counts. And now came the time for them to redraw and realign all the districts in the country.

05-00:18:11

Eardley-Pryor: Congressional districts?

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Mair: No, *all* districts—whether at the local, from everything from your town councilmen, all the way up to congressional districts—so everything that relied upon an equal population. That was anchored to the US Census. This is why the Constitution is very powerful, because it sets the clock for all points and all jurisdictions for representation in your decennial census. The decennial census is a very powerful document. And the point of reapportionment is all levels of representation.

So, at that point in time, as a young man, I was way ahead of my time. I had my cutting-edge skills that was assimilating and fusing this new information coming in, and then quickly processing and coming up with tools and courses of action by which we would empower a community, with pretty much cutting-edge technology. Because a lot of white communities were not operating or leveraging political power to deal with environmental regulation from a point of civil rights and voting rights.

This is the first time you have in these cases—the Arbor Hill reapportionment cases. And there were three of them, because we had to sue over three different decades because whites kept coming back to engage in the very processes that we see right now with the current Republican administration now. It only took until 2010 that they realized that the Republicans had redistricted the population to their advantage. So, basically, thirty to forty percent of the people control seventy percent of government power.

05-00:19:50

Mair: Well, African-Americans have been dealing with this since the days of the Civil War—actually, since the founding of this country, because when they classified us as three-fifths of a human being, that depresses your number. It gave whites a weighted advantage. So this is something that was known. But what happened in the modern 2010 sense was that which they'd been applying

exclusively against African-Americans. Because it was bipartisan—both Democrats and Republicans did this to African-Americans or minorities.

But this is the first time Republicans treated the entire Democratic Party like African-Americans. So they actually turned that whole tactic and strategy that whites in general, white privilege, even amongst the liberals, had enjoyed. This is the first time that they now had to deal with what Zion McKenzie, John Paul McKenzie, William Barry, my mother Margaret Elizabeth, that's what we have been dealing with for generations. So, we already know where that disempowerment is at. So now I had the mathematical and professional skill set and the tools to take that on.

05-00:20:52

Eardley-Pryor: What were you doing in '92 that let you do that?

05-00:20:54

Mair: Well, the thing is I was working with tools like Harvard Graphics. This is early reapportionment software—not even. There was no such thing as reapportionment software. This was basically tools by which you can thematically shade polygons by numbers. And so, whether you're counting diseases or counting cases, and you have polygons by which you represent them, and the thematic shading allowed you to deal with intensity and weights and colors. It gives you a visual expression of a population and what it represents.

05-00:21:26

Eardley-Pryor: Over a map?

05-00:21:27

Mair: In this case, I used a map. So, I used those thematic shades over a map. So, this was the earlier stages before you had ESRI [Environmental Systems Research Institute, which provides Geographic Information System software and applications]. ESRI wasn't around. You had a whole range. You had Atlas GIS, some of the earlier ones. MapInfo was one of the earlier ones. And again, the GIS software, like GPS, was actually created by the federal government. Basically, what ends up happening is that a private company gets a hold of this open-source code created by government. Then they privatize it, and they sell it back to the public. So, they sell it back to the public for what you, the taxpayer, pay for. So, I got one of the earlier iterations, in the early [nineteen-]nineties, of a GIS package called MapInfo. It was a DOS-based product.

05-00:22:18

Eardley-Pryor: Where did you learn how to do this sort of work?

05-00:22:19

Mair: Just like every kid or anybody that's fascinated with technology, you hacked. You were a hacker. You just basically ran a thing, and you just experimented. Since I was already experimenting on containment models and looking at

concentrations and distributions of where people were committing fraud and trying to represent that visually—

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Eardley-Pryor: Through your social Medicaid work?

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Mair: Through my Medicaid work.

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Eardley-Pryor: With the state [of New York]?

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Mair: With the state. So, I was already using maps to visually represent concentrations and clusters of aberrant behavior.

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Eardley-Pryor: And then you applied that to your activism?

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Mair: I applied the same technology and skill set to whether or not people were being—the percentages by which people were being clustered and aggregated. And so, I was creating districts of equal weights and equal populations.

05-00:23:05

Eardley-Pryor: To look at disenfranchisement on a map?

05-00:23:07

Mair: And you can look at the current population. So, you take an existing district of a legislator, and you look at the population that's within it. You look at the 1990 census. In fact, I had two censuses I could use, because I used both the 1980 and 1990, because I can look at the change in population. And so, I was looking at the clustering of the Black population that they had drawn. And what they did for Arbor Hill, they packed 100 percent of the Blacks into one district. But meanwhile they were then drawing districts for whites however they want to and advantaging themselves.

But my point mathematically is that, “Wait a minute. If African-Americans are thirty percent of the city of Albany, then we should have thirty percent of the seats in the common council. Logic would dictate.” And so, when I presented that, just in a general form and argument at a hearing, they said that, “No, you already have a Black district: Arbor Hill,” which packed in Arbor Hill, West Hill and parts of North Albany and Sheridan Hollow. “You already have a Black—.”

05-00:24:27

Mair: And they actually sent the African-American legislator after me, a guy by the name of Nebraska Brace. It was one of the funniest things. And they had this ward leader. His name was Rodney Littles. And he became like your spokesman to the Black community that Aaron's a troublemaker. And they do

that. What happens is, just like [US Secretary of Housing and Urban Development] Ben Carson or [rapper/producer] Kanye West is right now to [US President] Donald Trump, you need, as they say, a proxy to delegitimize the legitimate concerns and arguments of a population that's in need. So, in other words, if you're going to engage in a tool to disempower people, then you need to find a Black guy or something.

I always give the metaphor of the pine-handled axe. So, the pine-handled axe goes to the pine forest, and the pine forest still thinks that the pine-handled axe will be fair because it's made out of pine. But they don't realize that it's been shaped and forged into a tool that will now cut down even more of the forest. It's now a much more efficient and refined tool. And it's just only the familiarity of the composition that of the forest thinks that it's a good thing.

05-00:25:27

Mair:

So, you always find those pine-handled axes wielded by an oppressor to cut down the forest or cut down the people's will. So, my thing is that those tools and tactics, knowing that's the case, I applied my skill set to still be a part of the pine forest and to empower it. I became nutrients to enforce and, as they say, help that forest prosper and, as they say, grow.

05-00:25:50

Eardley-Pryor:

And got that reapportionment.

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Mair:

Multiplied the number of districts from one to three.

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Eardley-Pryor:

Tell me, what does that mean?

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Mair:

The number that you need for a district to be a majority—and by this, it's not guaranteed minority, but give the minorities the choice to choose whoever they want. Let the people decide. Let them have legislators to represent their views. So, if they want an incinerator, and if they have a good representative speaking for all those communities, you need three of them, not just one, and then they can speak. And so, one is corruptible. But three, at least you have potential for a check on the other two.

So, by using the mathematical proportions of what you need to have a majority to increase the power of people, all you had to do was have at least fifty-five percent of a district be of one cluster concentration. So, rather than having 100 percent of African-Americans packed into one district, I created districts that had anywhere from fifty-five to sixty percent, because when you create a 100 percent district, there's still a lot of Black populations of twenty and fifteen percent that don't have any assignment. And their voices become nullified because they're, like, fifteen percent in the district that's seventy-five to eighty percent white. So, their views don't matter.

So, once you reconfigure the map, all of a sudden you come up with these districts where there are a number of Black communities. So, Arbor Hill had its voice. North Albany had its voice. And West Albany had its voice, and the South End. So each of these communities ended up with representatives that gave them voice. And so, that's how you do it.

05-00:27:29

Eardley-Pryor: In the wake of the court ruling?

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Mair:

In the wake of that ruling. So, we ended up winning. At first, we had to prove harm. And one of the key conditions of proving harm—and this is where the environmental action mattered and the education action mattered, because we had a lengthy history of discrimination, and we were already demonstrating and picketing against the harm caused by the incinerator as a result of the political process. We were able to demonstrate harm using an environmental disaster that was occurring in real time.

And this is really important because no other environmental movement was making these connections, not even the mainstream environmental movement. To this day, the mainstream environmental movement is not tapping into the power of linking how things are sited in communities and then drawing districts so that communities can actually have more say. So, they elect legislators that are not corruptible by corporate interests. It's not 100 percent, but statistically you can absolutely start to bring in those legislators who won't vote for things that will destroy air, water and soil.

So, we have been proving that you can absolutely fuse these technologies as well as these civil rights claims and these issues and draw an effective evidence-based tool. And this is what's really critical, because you have to prove your case. The burden is on you to prove that harm. And so, when you have that data and that information and that evidence—and this is what my background allowed me to do, it made an evidence-based approach. So, we were a revolution with evidence. And we were using the courts and wielding it effectively starting in 1992. And these were huge leaps forward as you started to fuse the environmental movement, civil rights, and direct environmental action.

05-00:29:11

Eardley-Pryor: And that's eventually what turns into—when you're president of the Sierra Club—into your Democracy Initiative.

05-00:29:15

Mair:

As they say, I always tell people, I'm a broken record. What I am doing with the Democracy Initiative, what I'm doing with the climate work, what I'm doing with the diversity work, is replicating work that I began in 1990, 1987, and shutting down the incinerator, raising and elevating the power of the movement.

So, listen, if I'm going to save the community, I must include the community. I must elevate the power of the community. And that's what we need to do in order to save humanity right now. It's elevating the power of the populace to control and take back their democracy so that they're electing representatives that speak for them.

05-00:29:49

Eardley-Pryor: Let's get to your first introduction to the Sierra Club, because this happens around this time, too. The ANSWERS campaign is moving forward. You're getting a lot of press. You confronted the governor. You told us the story about really finding this really key moment.

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Mair: Exactly. Well, it's not finding. It's strategic action. We actually organized. And I borrowed the term *giải phóng* from the Vietnam uprising around the Tet Offensive. And the book was *Fire in the Streets*. [Eric M. Hammel, *Fire in the Streets: The Battle for Hue, Tet 1968*, published 1991.]

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Eardley-Pryor: Where you took this concept [from]?

05-00:30:18

Mair: [Yes, where I took] this concept from. And this is, again, using tactics. This is how you study tactics. I always tell people the reason why people go to West Point or any of the [military] academies is that you're studying military history. You're studying battle tactics, whether it is applicable from the Greco-Roman wars or what have you. But the tactics still remain the same. The genius of General Patton was him relying upon Alexander the Great. And so, you study these moves. You study Sun Tzu. It's not *The Art of Warfare*, but it's actually the tactical arrangements of battle. And so, when you start looking at these tactics, you start to look at ways in which you engage your community, to elevate them, to beat and effectively defeat your opposition.

So, creating a general uprising—and knowing that part of the lay of the land is media and the optics and the image, what people then see. Because people rely upon what the government says is truth. And clearly, if you're dealing with poor people you're already at a disadvantage. So, what does the government say? And so, if you create a situation and scenario where the objective evidence—in this case, helicopter aerial reviews showing the ANSWERS incinerator soot—evidence collected, that evidence being tested, and then you have the state on one end saying that you can eat a dump truck full of snow, and then all of a sudden the data comes back that says this stuff is deadly. So, you start to see people react in the same way that the Pentagon Papers exposed the reality of the Vietnam War. So, it is these tactics that one again calls on.

05-00:31:39

Mair:

And this is the power of a university education. This is the power that you have an interdisciplinary approach and that you take these skills coming from all sources. So, whether it's my military background, my university background, but also my father, Arnold, civil rights, labor rights. All these backgrounds are things that are all coming together. This is the kid that's reading the newspapers voraciously in the seventies of all these conflicts and all these social movements. But you study these characters and actors, and you're deploying these same tactics.

05-00:32:23

Eardley-Pryor:

And even to get the newspapers on your side, the Martin Luther King Day march that happens in January '94, you get that coverage in the paper.

05-00:32:31

Mair:

So, it was leveraging that march. So, we get that. And like I said, this is something that is very powerful. And one of the people inspired by our actions was a fellow by the name of Roger Gray, a coworker. He was a volunteer activist in the Sierra Club Atlantic chapter's Hudson-Mohawk group, the offices that we're sitting in right now. But at that time, they were up in the white area called Center Square.

One of the cool things about the Sierra Club really connecting to people, it's now moved its office in Arbor Hill. This is beautiful because now people go from being fearful of people in an area, to saying, "This is where the fight is at. This is where the front line is." They get beyond the color, and they get to the action and the work. And so, the fact that the front-line office of the Sierra Club Atlantic chapter is now on the front-line community, it's just how seamlessly these things—once you emancipate people from their fears, they do the work. And so, this is an example of that. So, Roger Gray—

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Eardley-Pryor:

Well, you said Roger Gray was a coworker?

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Mair:

Yes. We both worked for the State of New York. He worked for the division of blind and visually handicapped [now, Commission for the Blind], and I worked over in the Medicaid bureau. We literally were at different bureaus. Social Services is the bigger umbrella organization. This is where they put all these services that served people of varying needs. And so, all of your programs in which you would talk about entitlements, this was the single state agency that dealt with entitlements.

05-00:34:06

Eardley-Pryor:

So, how did y'all cross paths if you're in these different bureaus?

05-00:34:08

Mair:

Two things. He knew of me. He knew that I worked in Medicaid. And, you come in the building, and people see you, and they know who you are. And

my face was on television day in and day out. You see the debates with me and the governor and the commissioners. You've seen me and my face plastered on the newspapers. After a while, you're like, "Hey, I know that guy."

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Eardley-Pryor: You're also six-seven?

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Mair: I'm six-seven.

05-00:34:36

Eardley-Pryor: You're a large man, noticeable.

05-00:34:38

Mair: Six-seven, 280 pounds. I'm a big dude. And did I tell you I have a squeaky voice?

05-00:34:46

Eardley-Pryor: The boom carries. [*Mr. Mair has a deep and sonorous voice.*]

05-00:34:47

Mair: And I always tell people, when I'm with my war face, I try to channel my father Arnold's deep bass because I still have a weak, wimpy voice when compared to my dad.

05-00:35:00

Eardley-Pryor: Which is crazy.

05-00:35:01

Mair: And, so when you're out there, man, and the saying, "Let them see your war face," you bring the fire. And I channel every ounce and fire of that Baptist preacher, of Zion McKenzie, man. And, I bring it. I don't hold back. And so, there are a lot of very interesting pieces and clips out there of me passionately advocating for the needs and the rights and the justice that needs to be delivered to people whose only crime in life is not being economically fortunate and whose only crime in life is being born Black.

And, that fact that they put an incinerator in their back yard, it went from NIMBY, which is the term for "not in my back yard," to PIBBY, which is "put it in Black people's back yards." And only because they did not have the power, awareness or even how to engage the elected representatives, and their democracy failed them. It failed them.

So, Roger [Gray] saw my work. He bore witness to it. And in 1994, when they decided to shut the incinerator down, which was a huge victory, but that was not enough. For me, this is where a lot of movements fail, a lot of poor people movements, because they feel that once you stop the beating, that you now are okay. No, you're not okay. You now have to mend. You have to heal. You have to recover. You have to convalesce. And that takes resources and money.

05-00:36:36

Mair:

And that's why you go out and you sue for damages. While you will never be truly made whole, because nobody's going to repair a sick child's lungs or a child that's been exposed to lead who will be forever damaged and have their IQ reduced because of this chronic exposure to toxic ash laden with lead and other metals and dioxins. So, you have to sue. You have to litigate. And that was where the need for justice—since we were not equally protected under the law, we need to be equally made whole under the law.

So, it's at this juncture that we wanted to sue for the damages and sue for cleanup. And when we found the city was getting anywhere from five to twelve million dollars a year, and yet they paid nothing to the community, the burden being borne by this community, and yet the revenue was being shared by most of the affluent sectors of the cities with their parks being remade, investments into infrastructure in those areas, while our community was being totally destroyed and depleted and defiled. So, we wanted to go the next step.

05-00:37:46

Mair:

And so, we turned to a number of—we felt that NYPIRG [New York Public Interest Research Group], which served the folks over there in Love Canal, that they were right downtown, that they would be a natural ally. And, hey, if they sued for Love Canal and organized, they could help us. And, in short, we turned to them, and we were turned away. They said that they don't have money for litigation. They don't do litigation. They just do advocacy, et cetera, which is kind of a disappointment because here were these white allies that we thought got it.

And they actually—Judy Enck helped us on a number of fronts. In fact, Judy Enck in many cases—who was then the executive director of NYPIRG, New York State Public Information Research Group—she had been very good in helping us. But, a lot of tensions about their role and their place because, like I said, a lot of times they come in and say, “Well, we know it all,” and they want to take over. So, the community really pushed back.

When it came to the issue of organizing and strategy, we were sovereign about that. And so, when it came to litigation, just don't show up—and, by the way, in this victory, in this action, they get out there and they get their brand out there. And it gives them clout. And they are getting power from that. And so, we recognized that, and we said, “Hey, if you're benefiting by marketing off of us, this is what we need. We need litigation support.” So, they told us no.

05-00:39:17

Mair:

So, right about that time, literally as mana from heaven, Roger Gray introduced himself and said “Listen—.” And I pitched him on what my needs were. And so Roger says, “Look, solid waste crisis, solid waste issue is a big issue.” Because at that time, we're dealing with the closing of Fresh Kills Landfill in Staten Island, which was one of the largest landfills—in fact, it's so large you can see it from outer space. And, it was the source of the famous

garbage barges during the eighties and nineties going up and down because they had no state that [wanted] to take them. Then they tried to send them to Latin America, and so you had New York's garbage going up and down the eastern seaboard.

So, I figured that, "Hey, this is something that is a major issue within the Sierra Club. They have campaigns around solid waste. This would be a slam dunk." And, so I was invited down. All this was happening during that winter of '94. So, by winter I mean that December through April period.

05-00:40:20

Eardley-Pryor: December '93 through April '94?

05-00:40:22

Mair: Yes, December '93 to April '94. So, it was their winter meeting that was within that winter of 1994, that January to April. All I remember is that there was snow and ice on the ground when we drove down.

05-00:40:35

Eardley-Pryor: When you and Roger [Gray] drove down where?

05-00:40:36

Mair: We drove down from Albany, New York to Manhattan. They were having their chapter meeting.

05-00:40:42

Eardley-Pryor: That's the Atlantic chapter headquarters?

05-00:40:43

Mair: That's the Atlantic chapter. And when you go to a minority community and you say the Sierra Club, I just thought it was all monolithic. You don't know anything about these sub-groups, the state groups, the national. We did not know anything. It's like, the guys that used the Sierra Club, I literally thought Roger Gray headed it all. I thought he was Carl Pope [then Executive Director of the Sierra Club]. I now learned who Carl Pope and all the others were, later on. And I learned about the stratification later on. And I'm kind of embarrassed about some of the things. No, I'm not embarrassed—

05-00:41:10

Eardley-Pryor: How would you have known?

05-00:41:11

Mair: Because I didn't know. And I was glad that I crashed. I said, "The best way to crash a party is through the ceiling." Come through the roof. Don't ever go through the front door. Come up through the bottom, and you'll never get to the top. So, I came through the roof, man. So, I went down, and I figured that this guy, "Hey, if he's bringing [me]," he's the guy. Because I'm coming as an ambassador of my people. And so, the community is sending its best.

And this also happens with First Nations. When their chiefs go out, and they're meeting with entities, it's their nation being represented. And this is sometimes a cause of friction because the [receiving] community doesn't understand that, and the disrespect is very high when you just go blow somebody off.

05-00:41:52

Eardley-Pryor: And the institution at the time that you were representing is Arbor Hill Concerned Citizens?

05-00:41:57

Mair: Arbor Hill Concerned Citizens. And, Arbor Hill was this geographic community in the city of Albany on the northern side of Washington Street and Central Avenue, going up to the Menands border, to the Hudson River, and, to the west, to Henry Johnson Boulevard.

05-00:42:19

Eardley-Pryor: So, you and Roger drive down to New York. What happened in New York?

05-00:42:22

Mair: Well, we drove down. It's about three hours from the capital to New York City. And, so Roger does a very good job in teeing up the issue that they had talked about. [He] had the individuals of the Solid Waste Committee raise their hand and dealing with garbage. And, I went in to give a presentation on Arbor Hill, the incinerator, what had happened, and that we needed the help and we needed litigation support.

One of the things that the Sierra Club was notable for was its litigation, and that the Sierra Club—in fact, a lot of people joined Sierra Club to litigate on behalf of their environmental issue in their back yard. I would argue that it was *the* big NIMBY tool. And so a lot of people, their orientation and their coming in is fighting something that was going wrong.

05-00:43:07

Eardley-Pryor: And there's a deep history. David Sive [was] the Atlantic chapter Sierra Club chair at the time when the Storm King ruling—that gave environmental groups standing in the sixties. That's New York. [see Robert D. Lifset, *Power on the Hudson: Storm King Mountain and the Emergence of Modern American Environmentalism*, (2014).]

05-00:43:19

Mair: And what's really funny is they lost sight of that. They forgot about that. And it wasn't until my years becoming president and then finding out this deeper, richer history in environment, which inevitably you start to go from your movement, and you start to now dynamically pull in the greater movement that is the Sierra Club. When you get into the weight of what David Brower did with Cumberland Island—the “Archdruid,” man. I love the fact that he was called the Archdruid. [John McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, 1971.] I can dig it. I can absolutely dig it.

And so, you then see all those forms also in you. And so, that's the beautiful thing. How do you hold back this power and energy and not share that energy? In fact, at the end of the day, you borrowed it from the civil rights movement. That's what gave you the power to fight and use these tactics and tools. Why not share it back?

But again, I did not know that at that time. And so, after my presentation to the [Sierra Club's Atlantic chapter] Board, I figured that I was going to get questions about, "What would it cost?" Because I didn't know. I just needed help. This is my first time in this space. And, I never pressed outside of the Voting Rights Act [to] the environment. So, it was totally new virgin territory.

05-00:44:49

Mair:

But, I was really shocked at the first question that was asked of me. It was like, "Did you check with the NAACP?" [The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.]

So, let me take one step back, because when I walked into the room, as you mentioned earlier, I'm a big guy. I figured that when everybody turned their head when I walked into the room—when I walked into the room there was one Asian woman, and the rest were mostly all white folks that were in the room. And this was in Manhattan. And, mind you, Manhattan is pretty much, I think even then, was a majority minority city. So, demographically, they did not look like New York City. But, it was the [Sierra Club's] New York City group.

And so, when everybody turned around, it was kind of like a little bit of a shock. It was like the collective turn of the head. And, I always tell people, you had the feeling it was like the "What are you doing here?" type of look. "You're in our place and our space." But, I just went in and did my thing, because you just set that aside. But that was not confirmed and affirmed until one of the first questions that was asked of me, "Why didn't I check with the NAACP?", and "No, we don't have all the resources." So, all of a sudden it became resources. "We can't give to all rubes and everybody that comes in."

05-00:46:02

Mair:

So, it's kind of interesting that probably most of those people in that room came to the Sierra Club for the same thing that I wanted at some point in their history, some point in their activist history. Sure, there might have been a few naturalists and other hikers there. But a lot of those folks were there because of their rich history of direct action. In fact, they had just taken on the West Side Highway. There were a number of them boasting about their actions on the West Side Highway. So, they were there already holding back the reservoir and enjoying the reservoir of action that I was seeking to bring my cup to go down to that reservoir and take a drink.

05-00:46:41

Eardley-Pryor:

How did you feel when you got that question?

05-00:46:45

Mair:

It was like a gut shot, because you had to step into your—it's like it hits you. And then you have to start thinking tactically on how do you want to respond. And this is where a lot of people of color and community colors, they usually respond with a raw emotion. And you just break, and you just go away.

And at that particular point in time, the environmental justice movement was slamming mainstream environmental groups because of what they perceived as the other form of environmental racism—because environmental racism was not just the siting of these facilities and the regulations that result into these things happening to communities of color. It's also about the benefits. It's also about the access. It's also about sharing the power, sharing the action, sharing the light. So, once even the light of justice that is administered, or the activists that are engaged by the light of power, of the environmental movement—once that even becomes stratified by race, you see environmental racism is like all institutional racism. It affects everything.

So, that clear, bright line that I really was not welcome in the tent and that this was not my tent, and that my notion of environmental protection—that there was something now like a Black environment—this really hit really hard. Because now, the other side and the epiphany coming from my work in that early environmental justice space, I dealt with the racist polluters. Now I'm dealing with the racist activists.

05-00:48:24

Mair:

And this is a very powerful thing. This is like that slamming in the middle. This is that—again, calling up on my Zion McKenzie and my Bill—this is that Samson moment where you've just got to step in and do your thing. So, my thing was to thank them. And if I never seen them again, or seen the Sierra Club again, it was okay with me.

And, Roger [Gray] looked terrible. It hit him. And that's because if you're a human being and you came down there with pure intentions and motives, and you actually seen this come down, you know what it is. You know what it is. And, he also had to ride back for three hours with me in the van.

05-00:49:07

Eardley-Pryor:

Yeah, what was that ride like?

05-00:49:10

Mair:

It was deep. But, it was a beautiful debriefing because it was both of us alone for three hours, an African-American male and a white male. And, now this incident now also ties us together, because we dealt with the environmental racism, which was why we came there. But now we have to deal with the racism in the movement. And again, there was no tools. There was no language really to start to deal with other than what we already knew. And so, you still had the words. So, the most important thing that came from Roger right away, and he kept doing it over and over again, he was apologizing.

It was right for him to do. It was right for him to say, "I'm really sorry. As a human being, I'm sorry. I never expected that from them. I expected environmentalists to be compassionate. I expected them to be understanding." And more importantly, he was like, the thing that hit him was that this is not about—this is garbage. This is incineration. So, all of the things that he thought they had the high ground on, he saw that there was no real high ground.

And, I can see in him that, if their whole knowledge is protecting environment only for white people, I can also see in him that we're all doomed. Because if you think that the environment cares about color or the planet cares about color, go study the dinosaurs. It doesn't. It doesn't. Extinction-level events hit all species. We're all gone. There's no Black environment. There's no white environment. There's no gay, Hispanic, no. There's just the environment. And, the weight of that was in the room because this is the thing that's happened. But we now have to deal with this thing of race.

05-00:50:52

Eardley-Pryor: Where did you two take that when you came back to Albany?

05-00:50:55

Mair: I told him, I says, "Hey, man." I just thanked him for thinking of my community and for at least trying to get me to a place, to that reservoir of action, where he thought I would be able to dip my cup in to get a cup of water of justice. And, unfortunately, he was really as traumatized and saddened by it as I. And so, we had that conversation for about thirty-five, forty minutes. And the rest of the ride was quiet. You could hear a rat piss on cotton, as the old saying goes. It was that quiet. There's nothing to be said. It is what it is. What played out, played out. And, I left it at that.

But, in short, at that time, just a few weeks later, Roger came back to my home. He actually knocked on my door. I got a knock on my door. It was on a weekend. I'll never forget it. And, it was Roger. I'm like, "Hey, dude. What's up?" And he's like, "Hey, man." And again, he's like, "Duuude." I says, "Don't worry about it. Don't worry about it." He goes, "Look, man. I couldn't sleep. It affected me. And I had to do something."

And so, I'm saying, "Okay, now you've got my attention." And so, he pulled out this daggone sign, and it was a campaign sign. And it was the Arbor Hill Environmental Justice Fund on the top, and it was a pregnant woman with a child in the shadow of the ANSWERS incinerator holding an umbrella. And the umbrella was protecting her from the ash fall. And she's holding her belly and the umbrella, and the child's underneath the umbrella with her. And along the spines of the umbrella was the amount of money that we could raise toward the appeal.

05-00:52:34

Mair: And, a check for, I believe, about 250 bucks, the first-ever financial donation out of pocket from somebody, to help us in a legal fight, and that became the foundation. He created something, because the Sierra Club creates these little accounts which you can engage. And so, we used that to set up the Arbor Hill Environmental Justice account within the Sierra Club.

05-00:52:59

Eardley-Pryor: So, he gave you this check personally?

05-00:53:01

Mair: Yes. He came. He brought that. And I was humbled because you got the anger. But you also respected the fact that at least somebody from that side still cared enough to get you there. But, the fact that he really reached beyond to try to do some restorative justice, no matter how small. It had to make—and I think his father's a minister. I think his father is a minister. So, I can understand where it comes from. It's a point of faith with him, so it's just like with me. It's a deeper, spiritual thing that had to be done, the moral thing.

And it's not guilt. This was pain. This was "Take this thing. I can't take it away, but at least—" And again, lesser people would have said, "Get out of here. Go away. Take your money," and throw it back at him. Listen, we needed it. So, I took that money. I thanked him. I gave him a hug, and I said, "Listen, man, I'm going to use this." And I told him, "This campaign sign is what I really need." I said, "This is the type of idea, thinking."

05-00:54:12

Eardley-Pryor: Where did that poster come from? That seems like a powerful tool.

05-00:54:14

Mair: Well, he and a group of other activists within the Hudson-Mohawk group, they just basically pulled out the old glue, paste, scissors and the Saul Alinsky organizing manual, and they made a campaign sign. They got a compelling image, and they just basically went to work. They did not let the Atlantic chapter—that's when I learned about that the groups can just, like, "Oh yeah, go away, chapter."

05-00:54:37

Eardley-Pryor: So, this was the Sierra Club Albany group that Roger came together with?

05-00:54:39

Mair: This is the Hudson-Mohawk group, so that subset, that one-thirteenth of what would make the Atlantic [chapter]. Of the thirteen groups, that one group came up. It's its back yard. It knew the issue. And it was from their resources that they came forward through Roger Gray. And I think it really was him, mainly, that wrote that check. It came from a good place.

And when I took it, I made him a promise. And this is the reason why I'm here to this day. I says, "I'm going to take this check." I says, "You have no

idea what this means to me or what it will do.” I told him, “I promise, we will shut down—we will win this lawsuit.” And I promised him. I said, “And when we’re done with that lawsuit, I’ll become a member of the Sierra Club. And I promise you, Sierra Club will never do this to another community of color again.”

And I made him that solemn promise upon accepting that check, that instant. He probably thought I was nuts, because you know how complex lawsuits are and litigations are. And you’re going to be suing the whole of—you’re going to sue the state of New York, hold it accountable? And he thought I was just off my rocker. It’s like Babe Ruth standing at home plate and pointing and saying, “I’m going to smack the ball over that wall.”

05-00:55:56

Mair:

And, I had no doubt. I just had no doubt that a crime had been committed. And the more that we gave life to this crime, the state would come, and it would settle because it did not want the shame of what it really did to a people because they were poor and they were Black. And, I figured that it would come sooner than what it did, because this is about 1994. And it would be 1998 when we would actually settle and ultimately get a \$1.4 million settlement.

No, it’s supposed to be \$1.6—but actually it was. We got another grant, and that’s why. We had \$200,000, and that’s why. It was, actually, \$1.4 was the settlement. And the \$200,000 was from another grant when we got that money. But, it was \$1.4 actually in the court settlement.

But, that donation, that moment, that instant, that action is what made me come back to help the Sierra Club. Because if there’s one individual in the Sierra Club like Roger, then the issue is that it needed the culture change, and it needed a revolution. And here was something that we had already, through the environmental justice movement, sent the letter to all the big ten groups [the so-called “SWOP Letter” in 1990, named for the SouthWest Organizing Project, then directed by Richard Moore]. And I already knew from civil rights and direct engagement it’s not enough to ask somebody to do something or to demand that they do something. But, in the spirit of Dr. King, you’ve got to help them.

05-00:57:33

Mair:

And, you’ve got to pray with them. You’ve got to love your enemy. You’ve got to get up into the temple with them and help them see the light and be compassionate and be merciful, because there by the grace of God, your own arrogance, someday you’re doing something that’s not correct. So, it is that compassion and that commitment, but also that promise. Because of that action that [Roger Gray] took, that human step, that allowed me to take the 100-yard dash that I would do in the interim. Mind you, and it was a fight to

get in, to transform. This was not an easy cakewalk. There was resistance. There's still resistance to this day.

05-00:58:12

Eardley-Pryor: Are you talking about transforming the Sierra Club?

05-00:58:13

Mair:

From a point of transforming the culture of Sierra Club and transforming the notion of white privilege, the issue of—we came up with a [Sierra Club] training for the EJ [environmental justice] program called Dismantling Racism, because there was just the issue of saying the word “racism” freaked people out. And, in fact, even when I became president [of the Sierra Club] and I reminded the folks of the story, what happened, a number of folks who were around then, or may have heard of it, totally freaked out when the truth came back upon them—that, not only was I turned away, but it was done with a tone of racism and white privilege that was just outrageous. And when people now look back on it, you bet your boots they were humiliated.

And so, there was an incident that occurred when I became president where they tried to deny or reverse or say it never happened. But, I stand by my truth. And I stand by Roger Gray. He's there. He's on record. I have my sign. I know where the money came from. I know who did the work. But more importantly, you never forget the fact that you got up in the cold and you drove down three hours to New York City to have pie thrown in your face. You'll never forget that.

05-00:59:32

Mair:

The day when I was five years old in kindergarten, the first kid that called me “nigger,” I remember his name—Billy Riley—to this day. Every single African-American gets to that point where their innocence is shattered over their race, where that one kid or group of kids called him “nigger.” Every African-American can remember the day, can remember the instant. It's an indelible moment. That instant with the Sierra Club is an indelible moment. It stays with you.

But, what it also does is it inspires. And it also inspired my energy and my zeal. And then I just made the most beautiful sets of friends over this journey. I've made life partners. I've converted many, and they've converted me, because it's not just a one-way street. With activism you're constantly learning tactics, and you're constantly learning off others. But equally more important, there's nothing more beautiful than to see a whole group of even leaders get their PhDs off of my work and the path that I blazed as an EJ [environmental justice] activist.

So, there are people who are doctorates in environmental sciences with an EJ [environmental justice] specialty. And I'm glad that I created the field or was part of a revolutionary movement that created the field where they can actually get a doctorate within.

05-01:00:56

Eardley-Pryor: Well, take me to—so, you mentioned the settlement, the \$1.4 million settlement. I think it was a Resource Conservation and Recovery Act?

05-01:01:04

Mair: Yes, RCRA settlement, yes.

05-01:01:06

Eardley-Pryor: RCRA settlement for \$1.4 million. What did you do with that settlement in '98?

05-01:01:12

Mair: Well, there's two things. When you talk about the environmental justice movement, going to the core movement, it was one of the largest settlements of its kind. Because a lot of times, the settlements are for remediation and site remediation. Little is done, and little is provided for the victims of risk and exposure due to those contaminated sites. Arbor Hill and West Harlem, those two settlements in New York State, just like the Storm King, are very significant. They are very, very significant because they are the biggest settlements. And I believe—and I could be corrected—but I believe West Harlem and Arbor Hill were the first two. I'm not sure which one came first, but Arbor Hill was founded at the same time as West Harlem, and our suits were settled about the same time. But, they were amongst the largest settlements in the history of the movement at that particular point in time.

05-01:02:10

Eardley-Pryor: In environmental justice?

05-01:02:11

Mair: In the environmental justice movement.

05-01:02:12

Eardley-Pryor: It's foundational.

05-01:02:13

Mair: And so, it was foundational. And it was the first time—again, these were huge wins because one of the things that came out of the EJ [environmental justice] movement was they created a national Black Chamber of Commerce. The US Chamber of Commerce became so fearful of the EJ [environmental justice] movement that all of a sudden, in their 100-plus years, they're now creating a chamber of commerce for African-Americans. They didn't care about creating one back in the days of W.E.B. Dubois or Booker T. Washington. They didn't really care about Black capitalism. No, they cared about Blacks exercising their civil rights and how that would impact upon the regulatory world.

So, now they had to create a Black organization that would go out and go against the creation of laws that would protect Blacks from the horrors of chronic environmental exposure, because it would threaten capitalism in the Black community.

05-01:03:09

Eardley-Pryor: I'm just thinking, too, the bigger context of the 1990s in Black culture in the United States, Spike Lee has the "Malcolm X" movie come out, the Million Man March, the Rodney King beatings—

05-01:03:21

Mair: The Million Man March is the real reason why. Because they always talked—they could never put their finger on why during that era you had the sudden precipitous drop in urban crime and murders, et cetera. Giuliani tries to take credit for it, and everybody could never—it's actually because, they don't want to admit that actually, one of the good things that came out of the madman that is [Louis] Farrakhan was that there was a movie called "Get On the Bus."

And, it really was an introspection that the institutional racism is creating a culture and tradition where we're feeding upon ourselves. And it was a powerful indexing moment, that we had to start taking care, self-care, within the Black community, not Black nationally but self-care. "Let's put these guns down. Let's end the drugs." So people were turning out to get rehab. They were going to Alcoholics Anonymous. Men were either getting divorces or getting marriage counseling because they did not want to engage anymore in domestic violence. This was a whole phenomenon.

05-01:04:27

Eardley-Pryor: Were you seeing that happen in Arbor Hill?

05-01:04:28

Mair: Not only did I see it happen. There's a front-page newspaper of me organizing, getting ready to get on the bus to go from Arbor Hill, with a delegation from Arbor Hill, down to the Million Man March. So, remind me to send that to the archive. But, that also was playing out here. And so, there was a huge culture shift within this of awareness and action and focusing on institutional racism, rather than focusing on self and self-destruction and beating one down. The parasitism had to end.

But not only was it liberating. New relationships were being forged because, as we start to go out and to deal with the institutional racism, you had to build new allies. And so, how do you build new allies? People like Roger [Gray] and what would become allies within the Sierra Club. It was very few at the beginning, but they were powerful. They were dedicated. They were committed. These were people, as I started to rise through the ranks, the Robbie Coxes of the world, the Phaedra Pezzullos of the world, the Kirstin Replogles, the Robert Bingamans—Bob Bingamans, the Carl Popes once he got the light into him.

As you start to ripple that effect throughout the organization, you start to really win deep—Chuck McGrady, Republican, North Carolina, you don't get good old boy goober. When you shift a man from Asheville, North Carolina

into your win column, because he's down there seeing it from the South, and he knows it. He's been dealing with it. North Carolina is where that first incident occurred. So, Chuck McGrady and guys like that.

Because one of the things that happened was there was a big pushback with regards to population, this whole population campaign. And, this professor [Benjamin] Zuckerman, who was an astronomer out of Southern California [UCLA Department of Physics and Astronomy; co-founder in 1996 of Sierrans for U.S. Population Stabilization (SUSPS); Sierra Club Board of Directors, 2002-2005], their whole argument was to get the Sierra Club away from doing anything around environmental justice.

05-01:06:34

Eardley-Pryor: This is late eighties, early 2000s, mid 2000s?

05-01:06:35

Mair: This is the late nineties. This is after I'm within the Sierra Club movement. The environmental justice movement is now taking off. And you actually had significant pushback. Not only did we have pushback at the national level, but I was also in the Atlantic chapter. I was the Atlantic chapter, I think, Environmental Justice [Committee] chair at that time, getting ready to run for [chapter] vice-chair. And, this national population movement that was coming in, it was basically an anti-Hispanic migration or anti-immigrant movement.

05-01:07:10

Eardley-Pryor: This was about population control?

05-01:07:11

Mair: This was about population control.

05-01:07:13

Eardley-Pryor: But it was spun in a way of racist—

05-01:07:15

Mair: But it was spun as a nationalist movement. It was spun as—a nationalist movement was spun as population control. So, this is the argument that there's too many human beings on the planet. Human beings are responsible for the strain on all the ecosystems. And so, therefore, we needed to deal with population in a way in order to save the environment.

05-01:07:40

Eardley-Pryor: Where does the race piece come in for them?

05-01:07:41

Mair: The race piece comes in because the people that are the sources of the greatest strain—which is the “First World,” the industrialized nations—there was nothing in their population movement about them ceasing to use oil, ceasing to use industrial processes, controlling warfare, which is mainly engaged by them, or reducing their population. To [the SUSPS population-immigration control advocates], the population was the issue of brown people migrating to

the United States. So, if the issue of population control has nothing to do with the United States reducing population, and [nothing to do with] those white people advocating it practicing birth control amongst their own families and walking their talk, then you know that this issue is nothing more than an anti-immigrant, white nationalist campaign.

05-01:08:32

Eardley-Pryor: And this is happening within the Club?

05-01:08:33

Mair: This is happening within the Club. And it got some big multimillionaire finance—because one of the things you find with supremacists is that they try to frame issues and constructs in ways that seem sound and scientific and environmental. And actually, there's a deeper ulterior motive.

And this is like the John Birch Society, of which the Koch Brothers [Charles Koch and David H. Koch], of which their father [Fred C. Koch] was a major founder, a mover and shaker of, and they're the founders of the Libertarian movement. These folks realized that in order to change society, you've got to change culture. So, they create cultural institutions, whether it's the Tea Party movement, et cetera. And they package their ideas of America. And, unfortunately, a lot of their ideas of America doesn't include a lot of brown and Hispanic people. And it's not an issue of fortune. It's just racism.

So, if you can frame it in terms of economics, if you can frame it in terms of genetics, because they still use the argument that—these are the people, the Mercers [Robert Mercer and his daughter, Rebekah Mercer], who support and finance Charles Murray, the author of *The Bell Curve*, who talks about the genetic inferiority of Blacks and Hispanics. So, in other words, the actions and activities of Joseph LeConte are still very much alive. The voodoo science of Joe LeConte is still very much utilized to this day. It still fuels the American right wing.

05-01:10:09

Mair: And it fuels a lot of the legislative, what we call anti-entitlement policy, because it's another way of attacking the poor by proxy. If a disproportionate percentage of the population utilizes certain services, you slash their services. So, you don't call up them. You're just going to cut their services, which is another way of attacking them. And, you also blame those services as the sources and causes of the economic ills when actually it's about the lack of revenues for us to run a complex democracy.

05-01:10:32

Eardley-Pryor: So, what's happening within the Club amidst all these immigration issues—[these] population-immigration issues?

05-01:10:36

Mair: Well, one of the things that's happened within the Club, there was a tactical move. Because the Board, you had a Board of fifteen—

05-01:10:46

Eardley-Pryor: The [Sierra Club] national Board of Directors?

05-01:10:47

Mair:

The [Sierra Club] national Board of fifteen. So, what this [population-immigration] group tried to do—just like the Republicans did with the red map, and what they did with the Tea Party—was use the democracy of the Club and use the institutions of the Club to elect a slate of candidates that would basically, through democratic processes, vote their ideology in.

And when the Club became aware of their open policy on what it takes for people to run, and how you become a member, and you can go for their support—when [the existing Sierra Club Board] realized that their own democracy was being used as a weapon against them, so that it can now take in and usher in an entire [newly elected] Board of right-wing reactionaries, a number of them had the wherewithal to mobilize, sound the alarm, and bring in more progressive activists.

And that was at the point in time where I was heavily recruited to get involved in some of the national campaigns and activities. And so, I got involved from the chapter EJ [environmental justice] program, which Rhea Jezer brought me in for to do. I got involved in the [Sierra Club's] national environmental justice program. It was then the Environmental Justice Committee. And so, I had worked with Robbie Cox, Phaedra Pezzullo, Bob Bingaman.

And one of the things that we had to fight to save was the [Club's] environmental justice program. Because under this new wave of people, [the SUSPS population/immigration-control advocates elected to the Sierra Club Board of Directors like] Mr. Zuckerman, they wanted to actually get rid of it [the Club's nascent environmental justice program]. So, again, say, "Why is this program here? This is not environmentalism," dealing with race.

They were saying that dealing with all of the constructs brought out by the environmental justice movement, environmental racism and all these things, and challenging them, they just believed that that was not environmentalism or the environmental movement. And it had nothing to do with that.

05-01:12:31

Eardley-Pryor: Let me just try to frame what I'm hearing. The population control slate [SUSPS] that came in trying to control the Sierra Club's Board of Directors with their anti-immigration bent—

05-01:12:43

Mair:

They felt that the Sierra Club, by embracing not only policies that allowed for inclusivity—

05-01:12:50

Eardley-Pryor: Including immigration?

05-01:12:51

Mair: Including immigration and diversity—

05-01:12:53

Eardley-Pryor: Especially people of color.

05-01:12:54

Mair: They felt that that was actually—they were framing it as an environmental harm. And also, activities that the Club was already beginning to burgeon and grow into with regards to environmental justice had nothing to do with true environmentalism. So, they were taking a strict—to borrow the words of the conservatives, strict Textualist approach to conservation, which really is kind of a joke, because what they're saying—and this is where Wendell Berry hits in *Unsettling of America* [Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, 1977], is the best way to deconstruct that argument. Because it gets into the notion of Sierra Club as the “save,” meaning that you want a pristine, postage-stamp view of Yosemite without people in it. People mess it up, in this particular case, without those Black people or those brown people in it. So, even diversity messes that up.

05-01:13:42

Eardley-Pryor: This gets back to [John] Muir kicking out the Native Americans [from Yosemite Valley]. [see both Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Hidden Wars of the American West* (San Francisco, 1994); Mark Spence, “Dispossessing the Wilderness: Yosemite Indians and the National Park Ideal, 1864-1930,” *Pacific Historical Review* 65:1 (Feb. 1996): 27-59.]

05-01:13:45

Mair: This goes right back to Muir moving out the Native Americans because this populace, even though they've been there—it's kind of funny to hear. Here's a guy that gained the attention of [Joseph] LeConte by his analysis of the geology, and so he has a sense of geologic time, and so does LeConte. But yet their analysis led them to move out a population that lived in harmony with flora and fauna in the Yosemite Valley for thousands of years.

05-01:14:11

Eardley-Pryor: And it gets complicated.

05-01:14:12

Mair: And the threat, the threat to Yosemite was not by Native Americans but white industrialists. This is what gave rise to the Sierra Club, to save what was left of our natural heritage because it was the robber barons that was—again, LeConte went to the Helderbergs [the Helderberg Escarpment, or the Helderberg Mountains], which is in my back yard.

05-01:14:29

Eardley-Pryor: Here in Albany?

05-01:14:30

Mair:

Here in Albany. And those mountains, the limestone—it was nothing more than the ancient river beds and ancient species which now are limestone fossils—which the common cement company comes in and, as they say, decimates these pristine natural wonders. And so, it's kind of interesting that, while arguing for preservation and conservation, you move away humanity that's in harmony with it, a perfect example of true environmentalism, which includes humanity, the inclusive nature of nature. It was them imposing upon it their white will.

And so, when John Muir pushed out the Native Americans, when they pushed out the Native Americans out of Yosemite Valley, this is that weird type of conservationism that Wendell Berry excellently, in a perfect way, in *The Unsettling of America*, tears apart. In that book, he tries to restore the humanity back. But it's even deeper than that because it's not just white humanity, because he gets into the point of the "hidden wound" of this issue of racism and slavery within his family [see Wendell Berry, *The Hidden Wound*, 1970], because there is still a wound in his idea of farmers being the perfect environmental stewards. But what about the Black farmers? What about the Hispanic? Or what about the Native American farmers?

05-01:15:50

Mair:

So, this is that pulling that back in. So, this [SUSPS population/immigration control] group was a throwback to an ugly form of naturalists and the ugly form of the naturalist movement. And that is that old Joe LeConte racist environmental movement. But they won't call themselves racist because they were framing it in terms of population.

05-01:16:13

Eardley-Pryor:

What happened to this group then?

05-01:16:15

Mair:

Eventually, when the alarm went out, grassroots members, there was an internal struggle. And, in short, good voices won out.

05-01:16:27

Eardley-Pryor:

Was this part of the Groundswell [Sierra] campaign? [see Ben Adler, "Sierra Club Votes for Its Future," *The Nation*, April 26, 2004.]

05-01:16:28

Mair:

This was the Groundswell [Sierra] campaign. There was a campaign of folks that ran a slate of candidates to counter that. A lot of the staff, a lot of the activists, a lot of the volunteers got involved.

05-01:16:41

Eardley-Pryor:

Sierra Club Groundswell was a reaction to this anti-immigration, population control group.

05-01:16:46

Mair:

Exactly.

05-01:16:47

Eardley-Pryor: And Groundswell [Sierra] was victorious in the end?

05-01:16:49

Mair: They were victorious in the end. If they weren't, I would not be here. You would be talking to a different, Joe LeConte-type of guy who sounded probably more like Donald Trump.

05-01:17:00

Eardley-Pryor: So, the Groundswell [Sierra] movement helped maintain the EJ [environmental justice] program within the Club?

05-01:17:06

Mair: Exactly. Well, it called upon all folks. But everybody within it also knew—because remember the EJ [environmental justice] program, there was the financial backers of it. They were also a critical part of the financial health of the organization. So this program was not a burden. It was actually a benefit and a boon to the program.

05-01:17:24

Eardley-Pryor: Because donors were giving to the EJ [environmental justice program]?

05-01:17:26

Mair: Donors were seeing the horrors of environmental injustice and the disparities. And so, it became a point where people said the Sierra Club was a powerful force that could help change that. So they were investing in that change. And people who—he's been outed, but he was a confidential donor, David Gelbaum—they were investing significant seven-digit sums into the Sierra Club.

05-01:17:53

Eardley-Pryor: In part because of their [environmental] justice campaigns?

05-01:17:55

Mair: Because of their justice work and that justice space. And so, this would have been antithetical to it. And as a part of spite, one errant [Sierra Club Board] Director violated the confidentiality of this private donor. And it cost us, that funding loss. But the reality at the end of the day is that, that aside, is that even by pushing for that diversity, inclusion, it brought in more money. So in other words, again, even just engaging in that organic aspect of the higher humanity, it pulls in people.

So, this was a very powerful moment because I actually was in Albuquerque, New Mexico when the possibility of losing the environmental justice program came up.

05-01:18:41

Eardley-Pryor: Why were you in Albuquerque?

05-01:18:43

Mair:

Because that was where their national meeting was. And this was in the nineties. And so, this was part of that Groundswell [Sierra] effort.

So, I actually was one of the voices [in the Sierra Club] speaking up for the EJ [environmental justice] program. So, it was very interesting. I went from being the guy that was turned away, becoming now an Environmental Justice [Committee] chair, working to shape the culture by just direct action within the Club, sharing the technology from my community within the Club, and helping to build its environmental justice program. Then, to becoming one of its activist voices, to save the program within the Club, and that the Club needed to do this.

And, coming at it from one of the founders of the national EJ [environmental justice] movement, saying, "You need to be in this space," but speaking of the work that was being done on the ground and the important work that was done, and the need for it to be respected.

05-01:19:34

Eardley-Pryor:

How was your message taken in Albuquerque?

05-01:19:35

Mair:

It was received very, very well. Because when somebody's making an argument that, "It isn't conservation, it isn't the old notion of species protection." I tell them, "It's like taking a prism to white light and watching it refract in all the many colors and hues," and then saying, "which of those frequencies is better than the other? It's an absurd argument." Looking at a refraction of pure light and arguing is just an absurdity. So, you try to get people to see the light rather than the refraction or narrow frequency stream of it.

So, my argument was pulling them from [the SUSPS ideas, saying], "This guy's just going into the infrared spectrum, and just dealing in the infrared spectrum. Look at all the other beauty you're going to miss." And so, getting them into full light, all spectrums, which allows you to see more and see clearly, and truly see the light. That was the push, that was the fight. And we carried the day.

It was not just me. I just was nothing more than that preacher from Golden Grove giving a sermon from a chair to a Board, preaching to a choir who I know knew better and knew of the higher angels. And they actually heard. And they started singing the song.

05-01:21:06

Eardley-Pryor:

This is before you were on the Board?

05-01:21:07

Mair:

This is before I was on the Board.

05-01:21:10

Eardley-Pryor: So, [you were then chairing] the national EJ [Environmental Justice] Committee.

05-01:21:11

Mair: But it goes back to the promise I made to Roger, because in order to dismantle racism, I had to transform the culture from within. I always tell people I was like the alien creature. I said in the United Church of Christ, I said, “You ever see the movie *Alien*, how it goes in and the guys are walking around, and out comes the alien?” I said, “Yeah, this was me going into that organism and just toddling around and just doing my thing.”

But yeah, it was going in to transform the culture but transforming the culture through work, direct action, and authentic voice and reason. And so, that approach is what I kept with, with the Club.

05-01:21:54

Eardley-Pryor: Great. Take a little break here.

(break in audio)

05-01:21:57

Eardley-Pryor: Okay, Aaron. So, you’ve told us about how you became, by the early 2000s, a national leader in the environmental justice movement. Part of that came through your work in the wake of the ANSWERS settlement back in 1998. So, in ‘98 you fulfill your promise to Roger Gray. You join the Sierra Club. But with the settlement money you also start a whole new path locally here in New York.

05-01:22:17

Mair: Exactly. So, step back from the Sierra stuff, and just to pull on some of the parallel—the Sierra Club was not the only track. As they say, think of the old eight-track players. You did not just run on one track. You ran on, in my case, sixteen. It was a sixteen-track.

At the end of the day, you had the work that you volunteered to do with the national movement, because you’re taking the work from the EJ [environmental justice] movement into this [national Sierra Club] organization. And you’re now like, I saw myself as an ambassador, and that I had to deal with the tensions and the pain of the EJ [environmental justice] movement—and the righteous pain, because a lot of folks in the EJ [environmental justice] movement did not want to deal with whites. There still was a lot of stuff that was going on in various communities around the country.

So, I was being that ambassador, but I also still had work to do, and a movement to build, and resources to expend, and institutions to set up within Arbor Hill. So, we had this settlement, so there’s institutions. And two institutions we set up in 1998, right about the time I joined—actually, it was

simultaneous because in 1998/'99 was when I came on the Sierra Club. So, what I had to set up was two not-for-profits, two NGOs [Non-Governmental Organizations]. One was Arbor Hill Environmental Justice, and the other was W. Haywood Burns Environmental Education Center.

05-01:23:38

Mair: And the funny little anecdote about that was, when I got the settlement check, there was a whole big presentation with the attorney general and the governor of the state of New York at that time. It was a Republican governor by the name of George Pataki. A little bit about George Pataki, if I have not mentioned it before—he was from Peekskill, New York.

05-01:23:55

Eardley-Pryor: You have mentioned—Peekskill boy.

05-01:23:56

Mair: And he was not only a Peekskill boy, but his father worked for my uncle. He also played ball with my older uncles and my older brothers. And so, this guy was down at Uriah Hill and Peekskill High. If you ever read his memoir—

05-01:24:10

Eardley-Pryor: You had deep connections with him.

05-01:24:11

Mair: So, there is this deep family connection. And Peekskill is unlike Albany and a lot of other places. The relationships between Blacks and whites was not as stilted, not as openly, violently racist. There was actually a lot of interracial dating, the notion of community and family—and there was always Peekskill against the world. That's the other thing.

So, the mayor of the city of Albany who, at that time, with the ANSWERS incinerator, was Gerald Jennings. He just came after Tom Whalen. He was new in his office, but still he came above the Albany stripe of, as I mentioned, the thing that we sued against and the reapportionment of Blacks in their place. He came from what they called a Democratic [Party] machine.

A great book to read or reference on this is *O Albany!* by William Kennedy [William Kennedy, *O Albany!: Improbable City of Political Wizards, Fearless Ethnics, Spectacular Aristocrats, Splendid Nobodies, and Underrated Scoundrels*, 1985]. It gives you a sense of Blacks and whites and the relationship. And actually, Albany is—a little-known fact—is an unreconstructed Democratic Party organization. This is the party that goes back to the Copperheads, who were against Abraham Lincoln, who actually were Southern sympathizers. So the heritage of a lot of the Albany Democrats at that time—and to this day, some are still living to this day—actually go back to these Copperhead Democrats. And so, their pedigree are just like dealing with good old Dixiecrats. And so, their views are truly unreconstructed. In fact, this was one of the arguments in a line of arguments I

used in my reapportionment lawsuit that underscored why they were engaging and packing their redistricting.

05-01:25:36

Mair:

But be it as it may, the setting is the mayor of the city of Albany, white guy, comes in. And so, the city school district, which was again, controlled by city hall, they had arranged the chairs. They had put names on the chairs. And, it was like, "Wait a minute. This is a state settlement. What is the city doing arranging the chairs?"

And the way they set it up was that you had a dais where the governor, the mayor, the county executive, and all these people were sitting facing an audience. And, my chair was sitting in the first row. And again, this is that typical white privilege thinking, that I should be happy. I've earned, as a result of this harm and this litigation and winning, I've earned the right to not be on the dais to speak and talk and accept, but to be on the front chair, to be invited to be called up.

So, just the power dialectic of that room in 1998, it was really fascinating setup. So when I came in and I saw what was happening, I took my name off the tape of the chair, and I walked over and saw where they had placed the governor. And I took the name off of that chair.

05-01:27:08

Eardley-Pryor:

Off of Pataki's chair?

05-01:27:10

Mair:

No, not Pataki, the chair next to Pataki. I took that name off that chair, and I put it on the seat that they had me sitting in. And so, somebody from the school says, "Hey, you can't change that." I said, "Of course I can." I said, "Are you the litigator?" I said, "Who are you?" They go, "I'm so-and-so. I work for the school." I go, "Look, do me a favor. If you are not an attorney, and if you are not a plaintiff or defendant in this lawsuit, please don't address me." I just immediately wanted him to know that while he felt entitled to come up, because you're Aaron from Albany—this is that whole thing about power and privilege. They like to take on the airs and behavior of their bosses and masters.

And so, it was like that scene in "Gone with the Wind" where Hattie McDaniel is with Scarlett O'Hara, and they're walking down the street during what they call Reconstruction. Now, Blacks are free. And there's the stereotypical role of Blacks getting uppity and beside themselves. And so, what happened was scared Scarlett O'Hara sends Hattie McDaniel forward and that woman's first line, talking, "Get out of my way, Black trash." And so, she [Hattie McDaniel] is telling these Black men who were standing on the sidewalk—because before slavery, you knew that you stood out, and you knew your place. So this individual's doing that Hattie McDaniel role.

05-01:28:31

Mair:

But it's amazing how people psychologically fall into these roles of entitlement and behavior without giving you your proper respect. And so, I'm not here waiting for it to be delivered. And I'm not here going to be nice about it. One of the things about the environmental justice movement and the civil rights movement, you seize it. You take it. You don't need permission to be a citizen.

Where is my place? This is about me. It's not about these politicians who did not sue. If they shut down the incinerator, then yeah, you put them up there. But if they're just Joe-I'm-the-assemblyman, I'm-the-state-senator—but these are state assemblymen and senators who said nothing about the operation of the incinerator. You do not deserve the right. I'm the one who should be saying—they should be coming to me. Who do you want sitting up here on the dais with you? That should have been the question.

05-01:29:27

Mair:

So, I took that sign, and I put my sign there. And so, what happened was I sat down. I was not going to be moved. And so, what happened was when the mayor and the attorney general came in, I saw them in the corner standing and pointing and talking. So the attorney general came down and sat down on one side of me, and it's Dennis Vacco. And we were chatting, and the mayor just stayed up by the door. And then when the governor came in, and the governor's entourage, the mayor greeted him up at the door, what have you, and then they walked down together and we began the whole assembly.

So, the long and short of it was that when the governor got up to speak and announced awarding the settlement and congratulated me, one of the things he then said was, "Aaron, how is your mom?" And you could see the mayor go kind of pale. And, it was a level of familiarity that the mayor did not expect, because I never talked about it. I never bragged about it. And so, it was one of those little inside things that you see happen. So, in other words, the governor was briefed by the mayor about "the troublemaker." And he didn't use that term. In fact, the governor in points of levity, he would say, "I was talking to Jerry Jennings coming in, and he was telling me all about Aaron." He goes, "But what he doesn't know is that I've known Aaron since he was a kid."

05-01:30:54

Mair:

So, here's that piece of hidden intel that now hits the floor. And then Jerry looked like Rodney Dangerfield giving his routine, because now Jerry doesn't know what George has told me of how much of the conversation it was. But he just let the cat out of the bag. But the point of the matter is that this is about power, and this is—when you talk about justice in connection to power, again, you see the power and privilege is deconstructed. You can see it happen in real time.

And, so the long and short of it is that with that settlement, you had an immediate adjustment of the relationships and the roles. Because now, all of a

sudden, Jerry realizes I have direct access to the governor. That was what was daylighted. And that would come back to be parts of tensions and attacks in the future on our community. But what came out of that meeting was the governor announced that we created—we planned, because one of the things is what are you going to plan to do? So, we set up two not-for-profit corporations.

05-01:31:56

Eardley-Pryor: Why two?

05-01:31:58

Mair: Why? One, because I wanted to do environmental education, because we need to basically make sure people were aware of what environmentalism is. There's a huge deficit of the knowledge and skills that was needed for people to understand not only what the environment is, but what their rights are.

And, most people, poor people in general, when you tell them about toxins in fish or what have you, when you talk about PCBs in fish—which was going to be another project that we got into—they figured that you could smell it or see it and that it's okay if you didn't smell anything wrong or you didn't see any overt defect. And I tell them, at the bottom molecular level, at the cellular level where PCBs and other toxins and mercuries are stored in the fatty tissue, you will not see it. And, you had to talk about bioaccumulation. You had to come up with ways of telling people how this stuff passes from fish to you, being a top predator. I said, "Here's a food chain."

So, we had to take things that we were taught in high school and middle school to reeducate these communities, because a lot of these communities, they had the same stuff but folks never connected the dots. They never had any aspiration or whatever. But the point is, whatever the reason, folks lost sight of the basic eighth grade biology of food predators and going to the top of the chain.

05-01:33:23

Eardley-Pryor: So, that's the role that the Haywood Burns [Environmental Education] Center would do.

05-01:33:27

Mair: The Education Center is to make people much more environmentally literate and to be intelligent consumers of the environment.

And the [Arbor Hill] Environmental Justice Center was the counterpart. So to make sure that if anybody came to pollute or do harm or seek legislation for advantage at the disadvantage of the community, the Justice Center wanted to have a few nickels in its pockets to lobby, campaign, and, if necessary, litigate against those aggressors. Because one of the other weaknesses—this is the problem that we had when Roger [Gray] had to pass that hat—was that we did not have the money to sue.

And so, that put us on par with what I called the average white working class and white middle class community, because if you have the money and they know that you have the money to sue, they're going to think twice about their investment in that area. Because one of the things that any business or even municipalities are sensitive about is how much is it going to cost if I go in that place? And so, once you realize or raise the cost to it being anywhere, then you have a better chance of it not being put in your back yard, but it being put in the right place.

05-01:34:35

Mair:

So, they're going to consider things like—unlike Wall Street with the West Harlem [West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc. (WE ACT for Environmental Justice)], instead of making sewage flow uphill. “If we're going to face lawsuits putting it in its proper place versus lawsuits putting it in this other place of this disempowered people, but we're going to be litigated against the same,” then they're going to let science dictate what they've got to do. So having a justice arm where you can actually defend a community, and having an education arm where you can educate the community, were two critical gaps.

And so, two things I had to do with the settlement. Because the check came in my name, Aaron Mair. So, I had to tell my mom that I was a millionaire. And it was kind of funny. She heard about it. It was big news back then. And what was hilarious is that I was a millionaire for about a week. And so, when I told my mom that we won the settlement—just like the Love Canal, they won their settlement—and then you got the settlement in your name. Because it wasn't a class action [where] you had to divide it amongst people, you were the main plaintiff, the check came from the State of New York to Aaron Mair. So, I took pictures of it and sent them around. I actually went to SEFCU.

05-01:35:52

Eardley-Pryor:

What's that?

05-01:35:53

Mair:

State Employees Federal Credit Union, the bank, to deposit the check. And I found the one Black teller that they had. And I said, “Can you come here?” And she said, “I'm kind of busy right now.” I go, “I think this is kind of important,” because I knew that tellers were rated by their deposits. And so, I made sure she was the one to write the deposit and do my deposit and set up my account. So when she set up the million-dollar—and true to fact, she ended up becoming branch manager as a result of—and this is talking about investment. This is how wealth and how if you strategically invest, how you transform power relationships.

And so, when you have money coming and you're perceived to be somebody that's brought in this huge deposit, this kid, this woman brought in a \$1.4 million deposit. And then, all of a sudden, she went from being a teller, where she had been for years, to all of a sudden becoming the branch manager. And I

don't know where she's at right now, but true story. It's those things that you intentionally do because you know the ripple effect of them.

05-01:37:02

Mair:

So, I gave that money away. My mother was calling people and telling them how I lost my mind. "Aaron had a million dollars, and that fool gave it away!" And I told my mom, I says, "Listen, we had part. We didn't have it all." She goes, "But Aaron, you could have kept something." I said, "Mom, I argued and I litigated on behalf of the community. I was their voice." I said, "Just because I'm the smartest one in the community and I could frame and articulate the argument, it doesn't give me any special rights," because I used their statistic. I used a population.

I said, "Mom, by population I meant everybody. I used everybody's suffering, Mom. So, it's not just Marjana's suffering. It's not just Heba's suffering, and my suffering, or Maria's." I said, "I used everybody's, Mom. So, Mom, it's just not right for me to take an argument and pocket it." Granted, I could have done that. I could have given \$20,000 or \$50,000. And, folks would have said, "Hey, he fought that fight. He was out there. Everybody saw him out there every day. He was out there leading it." And people probably would have been none the less wiser.

05-01:38:09

Mair:

But the higher discipline for the movement, for the cause, for the struggle—but more importantly, this was my avocation and not my vocation. So, I've already got the blessing of a college education and a decent civil service job. And I did not come here to live off the suffering of others to make myself wealthy and then, as they say, become a voice from that end. Mine was to, from the beginning of this movement, to separate my vocation from my avocation, to take that temptation away.

So, I had that particular code of ethics that I brought to this. And this was something that I lived by, but also something by 2004—by 2005 I would lose the corporation spot, because ultimately we had people who could not walk that walk. We hired people, and they crippled the organization. But, at the point in which we set—when we set the corporation up, at the point in which I got that settlement, it was a settlement for Aaron Mair. So, if people were to pull records of that check, when they get that check, they get an image of that check from the comptroller's office—

05-01:39:17

Eardley-Pryor:

It has your name on it.

05-01:39:17

Mair:

They will see Aaron Mair. They won't see Arbor Hill Community. They won't see a group or whatever. It says, "To Aaron Mair."

05-01:39:26

Eardley-Pryor:

That's beautiful what you did with that.

05-01:39:26

Mair:

And that example is, to me, the most important thing next to having my children. I get to stand before my creator and say I gave my all for the cause, and I did the right thing. At least, that was my belief. Those are values. Those are my norms. Those are the norms of Zion McKenzie. Those are the norms of William Berry. Those are the norms of John Paul. Those are the norms of Arnold saying, "Do the right thing."

So, while I wasn't the biggest, strongest brother, I still kept my father's values in fighting for the people and delivering to the people. So, taking that money and putting it back in the hands where it could do the most good, the right good, and not taking any advantage for myself, my advantage was to use my skills on behalf of the community. So, that was a very, very important thing.

And, let me say this. When battling, even within the environmental justice movement, when I tell people, I says, "This is what I did with the money." Even people in other groups, when I give my talks, I go, "This is what I did." They're like, "You didn't take anything?" I said, "Zippo." I said, "I had my salary. I had my pension. I had a good job. My wife's a schoolteacher. If I'm using everybody in the community"—like I said, that was my choice. I don't expect everybody to abide by that, because a lot of people, when they take settlements or class action suits, they get a disproportionate share for themselves, and then they let the rest be settled by others. That's just not the way I roll. If it was only myself and for myself, then it would be appropriate. But, if I had to use the population to get an advantage and use the moral horror that occurred against an entire population, it is totally immoral—again, my values—to use that on my behalf.

05-01:41:25

Eardley-Pryor:

You've mentioned that the Arbor Hill Environmental Justice Corporation was created in the wake of the '98 settlement and then disbanded around 2005. So, what were you able to do during this peak time when the corporation existed?

05-01:41:40

Mair:

Well, the thing is that we did a number of things, because we really rolled into educating a lot of the youth. Because at that time, we had Field of Dreams, and we had already reclaimed a lot of urban parks. So now, all of a sudden, we had fuel to bolster reclamation of urban space and open space. And we were able to mobilize the community and invest in projects, so that the residents can actually enjoy it.

05-01:42:06

Eardley-Pryor:

Was Field of Dreams going on at this time?

05-01:42:07

Mair:

Field of Dreams was going on at the same time. And so, we got a hold of Tivoli Preserve, and we also got then about a \$1 million trails grant on top of that settlement. And we were able, with settlement money and trail money, we

were able to put in an entire trail system and start to clean up Tivoli Preserve proper. I was able to bring in an individual by the name of Yusuf Burgess—they call him Brother Yusuf—because then-governor George Pataki was really impressed with the fact that we got Field of Dreams. We had over 1,000 kids engaging in recreation.

Also, at that time, the city [of Albany] won the City Livability Award by taking a grant [application] that they denied us revenue for, and they actually stole our grant [idea in our application]. The City of Albany stole our grant [idea], denied us funding, and then used our grant [for their own grant submission]. And they submitted it to Washington. And not only did they get national recognition. The mayor of the city of Albany was able to go to Washington, DC at that time and appear with President Bush and Colin Powell and receive the City Livability Award.

05-01:43:20

Eardley-Pryor: So this was a grant you applied to the city [of Albany], they denied you, and then the city used it to get a federal grant?

05-01:43:24

Mair: Yes. And the grant was a significant environmental infrastructure grant. And it was basically using the same construct and thesis around business improvement districts. Because every time you say “business,” they have no problem throwing money and corporate welfare at business. But they don’t invest in people. So, we turned that on its head and took that whole environmental message and made it a “Kids Improvement District,” whereby we can use the environment to save children.

05-01:43:50

Eardley-Pryor: Based on the Field of Dreams idea?

05-01:43:52

Mair: This is not only the Field of Dreams, but this is before any of the youth outdoor programs were coming up. This was the pioneering effort. We were already cutting this ground. So, we created something called the Kids Improvement District. So, this predated outdoor efforts. This predated all these groups that you see to this day.

But what we also did, we brought in young people and elderly people who had been doing mentoring programs and other things—who’d been doing other sports like basketball, football—but bringing them into the environmental space. And one of these people was Brother Yusuf.

05-01:44:24

Eardley-Pryor: Before that, how did you find out that the city used your grant that they denied you to get this federal money?

05-01:44:29

Mair: Oh, that’s the hilarious piece, because when they won the award—

05-01:44:33

Eardley-Pryor: The national one?

05-01:44:34

Mair: The national award, now it's going to hit the news. So, something that they did surreptitiously was now going to become daylight. It was going to become public. And naturally, if that hit the airwaves and hit the front page of the paper, and I knew it was mine, they knew legally they were in trouble. Because they knew that not only would I come after them, but I had the money to do it.

05-01:44:57

Eardley-Pryor: So, this is in the wake of the settlement? This is early 2000s?

05-01:44:59

Mair: This is in the wake of the settlement. This is one of those things that—it was one of those dumb things that they did. And it was like, if you're going to steal, don't steal something and then win an award with it, because then you've got to go out in public with that.

05-01:45:19

Eardley-Pryor: So, how did you find out?

05-01:45:20

Mair: So, the deputy mayor of the city of Albany called me up, Phil Calderone, and said, "Hey, Aaron, I want to talk to you." And he invited me down for lunch at city hall. And I knew something was kind of strange because when I got there, there's food on the table. And, you know that when there's food on the table—this is an old Albany trick. This is like the hot dogs. It's like, "Okay, what's going on?"

And so, they talked about this award and everything. And then they laid a frame that they wanted to feature the Field of Dreams and all these other things, and they wanted to do a collaborative effort. We have a successful program, and they want to roll us in. So, he started telling me about it. I go, "This sounds like my Kids Improvement District grant." He goes, "Well, it is." I go, "The grant that you guys denied me my funding over, and you"—

And so, what happened was they actually had this white group called the Jaycees [United States Junior Chamber], and so it was really—the environmental racism piece, again, is that they're using white groups to front a program that is created by an environmental justice entity that's now already got it up. We're implementing it. So in other words, you've got this whole program. It's going to be using the environment and the urban environment and open space and all these, as they say, a "network of infrastructure" to improve the life outcomes of a child. So if a child learns from their environment—basically, the argument—if it's nurture, not nature, then let's do the enrichment through all these activities. And we've got this Tivoli Preserve. We've got all this stuff going on. Let's really infuse this in the kid.

So, how dare you take my environmental approach to actually altering an outcome of a child?

05-01:47:10

Eardley-Pryor: What did you do with their—

05-01:47:12

Mair:

Well, two things. You can melt down. You can embarrass them. You can humiliate them, which would then probably cause the national people to freak out, and they would probably disinvest. Or, you look at the child, and you say, “We’re here. This is a mess. How do we save this? How do we move forward?” And mine was always just like, it’s something where you put the interest of the children forward.

Now, in the back of my mind I said, “I’m going to get you. Trust me, we’re going to have a conversation.” But the way the conversation rolled out, I just basically—we just started and said, “Listen, you got me here, but this is what I want. I need this, this, this and this.” And the big “this, this, this and this” what I wanted was, I wanted site control over the park over there in Arbor Hill. And with that, they gave me the background historic records.

And that’s when I found out that the recreation program that they were running, an *adult* softball league, actually was a *youth* program for over 100,000 for years. And the guy that they had running it was basically using youth recreation programs to run his own little side adult softball league operation. So, that grant allowed me to get the keys to information to find out historic abuse. And so, with that, armed with that information, we actually went and had those people fired and tossed. And, these were guys, African-Americans, who were working there for decades.

05-01:48:36

Mair:

In fact, a guy was named Hank Wallace, and they called it Wallace Field. And Hank Wallace had been running that corruption for so long. People actually—[he] convinced people that he actually owned the league, he owned the park, and he had a franchise right. So, he totally spun the fact that he was a civil servant as if he was a private entrepreneur running a franchise. And the leagues were paying him baseball leagues’ fee. But meanwhile, he was stealing from the children because he was being financed, paying his staff, through park revenues. But here’s the thing. The city knew about it, because Hank and his workers were all Democratic Party committeemen.

05-01:49:15

Eardley-Pryor: It goes deep.

05-01:49:16

Mair:

It was rolled into part of the political patronage system.

05-01:49:19

Eardley-Pryor: So, what I'm getting from this is you're involved in multiple scales and multiple ways and multiple issues around space and control and community.

05-01:49:26

Mair: But the critical thing, too, is expanding—taking back and restoring recreational space that had been taken away, that actually was an entitled right. And, even when negative things were happening, even when we were being ripped off, we were able to still flip that into usable investments into children. The other thing was creating economic opportunities and pathways for African-Americans who did not have traditional pathways to work in the environmental field and sphere.

So, people like Brother Yusuf, actually for the first time, went into the conservation sphere. He actually, from us, went from working for Field of Dreams to then working for DEC [New York State Department of Environmental Conservation], and he became an outdoor educator. And that came from his work and mentorship through our program. And he became a very beloved asset of the conservation [movement]. In fact, to this day, I think there are a number of groups that give a lot of high praise. But where Brother Yusuf got his start was with Arbor Hill Environmental Justice and W. Haywood Burns Environmental Education Center.

05-01:50:27

Eardley-Pryor: When Arbor Hill Environmental Justice and Haywood Burns—they were initially in the same building, [at] 200 Henry Johnson Boulevard.

05-01:50:34

Mair: Yes. 200 Henry Johnson [Boulevard] was one of the places where it was a community CDBG [Community Development Block Grant] building setup. It was set up by HUD [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development] funds. And this was when, right now our current governor Andrew [Cuomo] was—now, this is under the Clinton administration, he was the Secretary.

05-01:50:52

Eardley-Pryor: Andrew Cuomo?

05-01:50:53

Mair: Andrew Cuomo. He was the Secretary of HUD. And this was a major pork giveback to the City of Albany, investing in urban infrastructure for community citizens and base of actions. So the 200 Henry Johnson was a community infrastructure that gave meeting spaces, classroom spaces, job training spaces. And we were one of the early tenants of that infrastructure. And we occupied one quarter of that building.

And so, it was from that building that a number of other environmental actions—so, not only were we working with Field of Dreams, but the other issue with our community was subsistence and angler fishermen. These were African-Americans who, like my childhood, growing up dependent upon the

Hudson River for access for fishing and food. And there was a threatened risk to them with regards to the removal of Island Creek Park. Part of the expansion of the Hudson River, they were going to take away the last bit of park that African-Americans could congregate at and fish. And so, we were part of the effort to save Island Creek Park.

05-01:51:50

Mair:

But also, in going into Island Creek Park, we became aware of the chronic exposure of these populations eating contaminated fish. Because when you get into that space and you open up the area of food consumption, now I'm in the field of environmental health and science. And now I'm looking at not only contaminants from air with the incinerator, but now you're looking at what else is contaminated. What's the next new frontier? Then you start looking at the other obvious things.

This is when I got into looking at the Hudson River and its condition. And then, I became fully aware of the PCB issue. This is polychlorinated biphenyls. And, this was a byproduct of capacitor oils that were being pumped into transformers by General Electric at its Fort Edward plant north of Albany and above the Troy Dam. What happened was they would push all their discharged PCB oil into the Hudson River.

05-01:52:46

Eardley-Pryor:

The GE plant was just offloading?

05-01:52:49

Mair:

In short, GE was making billions of dollars off these transformers and capacitors for generations, for decades. And the environmental burden and cost of their waste was the Hudson River. So, they took this pristine river and made it their open-air dump. So, basically, the Hudson River for 230 miles was a toxic dump with a river flowing over top. And so, in that toxic dump, you had fish. And so, the flora and fauna and the entire food chain, the food web within that Hudson River, became heavily contaminated. Depending upon the class of fish, it would become super-concentrated with PCBs, and PCBs would be in their fatty tissue. So the oil-laden fish like the carp, catfish, eels, were some of the most dangerous fish you can eat.

05-01:53:38

Eardley-Pryor:

And those are the ones that most are being caught to eat?

05-01:53:39

Mair:

Because not only are they in the water, but they also are close to the shore because they're often bottom feeders. They like the sewage outflows, and so they're easier to catch because they're closer to shore. The migratory fish were like the shad, the herring, and the striped bass because they go out to the Atlantic Ocean, and then they come back. They are in the center channel. And they're not as heavily contaminated.

So, here's the deep thing. If you're a traditional commercial angler, you've got a boat. You can go into where the cleaner fish are. So, there's actually, just through nature, this form of if you're poor, long and short, you're more likely to get the worst contaminated fish. But if you had a boat and you're middle class and you can go out into the middle, you can get shad, stripers, and fish that were less contaminated. So, it was very—the irony that your toxic risk and exposure do to just your socioeconomic status put you in that higher risk.

05-01:54:27

Mair:

But equally more important was the fact that they were talking about eliminating this spot. And I knew what angling meant for my family, the culture, custom, and heritage connection where fathers are fishing with their sons. Sometimes it's the only thing that they've got. It's the only recreational hour that they've got. It's the only recreational hour that they have with their family and the environment that they have.

And they were going to take this spot away to expand the waterfront, so that they can have more suburbanites come and enjoy the Hudson River waterfront. This, again, was at the height of most cities from Albany down to New York City now reclaiming their waterfront and chasing low-income communities and fishermen from their fishing spots.

05-01:55:21

Mair:

So, we stepped into that breach to fight to save Island Creek. But when we got into that breach, we realized we were then also preserving their right. These people were eating contaminated fish. So, the issue was we went after the source, which was General Electric. And we became part of the battle against General Electric to clean up the Hudson. And so, we had something called—they had sit-ins during the civil rights era. We were holding fish-ins. It was our unique activist approach to draw attention to the fact that communities of color had—because of culture, custom, and heritage—had a unique risk of exposure with regards to the fish.

And so, what was really powerful about this, it came at the same time that the Sierra Club internally, the Atlantic chapter, was pulling apart through the standard acrimony over resources and what have you. So, we saw that we could use the Hudson River in a campaign against General Electric to unite the Atlantic chapter of the Sierra Club.

05-01:56:22

Eardley-Pryor:

And you had already joined the Club at that point?

05-01:56:24

Mair:

I had already joined. I was already the [Atlantic chapter] Environmental Justice [Committee] chair. So I'm already, again, using a local issue, a local need, but also curating a division and fissure within the Atlantic chapter. So,

we had a visitor to try to bring the Club together. They were trying to find an activity. That was spearheaded by Bruce Hamilton. And we all met up.

05-01:56:44

Eardley-Pryor: [Bruce Hamilton] from the [national] Sierra Club?

05-01:56:45

Mair: He was national conservation staff, and he was basically coming as a facilitator. One of the ways when [local] clubs have dysfunction and issues where they just need to come together, national spends money on—this is what your dues pay for. They pay for facilitators, and they usually have some of the best facilitators on staff. So they don't have to hire outside. They bring in and they fly in some of their talent.

So we met up at the Saratoga Spa facilities, and we pulled together all thirteen [groups of the Atlantic chapter] huddled in a room, trying to find a common campaign that the Club could come together.

05-01:57:19

Eardley-Pryor: Across the Atlantic chapter?

05-01:57:20

Mair: Across the entire Atlantic chapter, from Buffalo, from Plattsburgh, down to Manhattan. And the thing that connected us was our waterways. The Mohawk flowed into the Hudson, and the Hudson flowed from the Adirondacks down to New York Harbor. So, the Hudson River campaign to clean up and to go after a big, dirty polluter, and focusing on a dirty polluter rather than other divisions, they felt that this would be a powerful tool.

For me, it brought in national resources to help augment the resources of the EJ [environmental justice] community already fighting on the Hudson. This was an opportunity to also blend and multiply that power and build up a force. And so, once they anointed and passed the campaign to clean up the Hudson within the Sierra Club, what that meant was that we got national dollars. We got an organizer staff. Chris Ballantyne was brought in. Chris Ballantyne now works for [New York State] Department of Environmental Conservation. But he was a brilliant tactician. And, he just served as a whip to just keep people on message and coming up with innovative ways and opportunities.

05-01:58:26

Mair: In fact, when EPA Secretary [Carol] Browner came, he arranged for me to speak at the New York State Assembly. And so, not only was I speaking with my Sierra voice, but I also spoke as an EJ [environmental justice] person. And up until then, GE was winning the argument because people were getting into arguments about the science and what it was permitted to discharge and whether it exceeded its permits, et cetera.

And my argument from the culture, custom, and heritage and the EJ [environmental justice] perspective was, no, it's the people, stupid. Human

beings have a right to clean food. This is a heritage right. And the Hudson River is part of that natural heritage that all Americans should have a right to use and enjoy. No company has the right to convert it into its sewer or its superfund site and then walk away because they say because some legislator or some law was written that gave them—no, you can never walk. You've got to clean this up. We have a human right to food. We have a human right to clean water. And GE had a moral obligation and legal obligation to give it.

05-01:59:28

Mair:

So, [Carol] Browner heard that perspective, and it was that perspective that clicked. So, after that hearing, when that happened—and again, hat's off to the Hudson River campaign. Hat's off to that staff that was astute enough to get in the powerful argument.

05-01:59:43

Eardley-Pryor:

Christian Ballantyne was a Sierra Club staff member?

05-01:59:45

Mair:

Sierra Club staff member.

05-01:59:47

Eardley-Pryor:

Who else was involved from the Club?

05-01:59:49

Mair:

You had a number. You had Chris Ballantyne, Mark Bettinger—Mark Bettinger who would then—I think we had these NRC, or these Northeast Regional Committees. But still, you had a lot of cluster of staff up in Saratoga. But it pulled in the full chapter staff. At the end of the day, Atlantic chapter staff of that era stepped up and really were trying to make this effort. Because we had a success, because there was something bigger here.

So, in that culture, custom, and heritage argument, and with the footage of that going out over the media—and our fish-ins, again, hammering that culture, custom, and heritage dependency and the right of people to clean water, clean air, and clean food and that—it was picked up by a CBS affiliate and carried to New York City. And at that time—I'm having a little bit of a moment, but in short, Bill Moyers, who has a special, he caught that CBS feed.

And, that was the inspiration by the Hudson River, the Heritage River came from [*America's First River: Bill Moyers on the Hudson*, Part 2: "The Fight to Save the River," first aired April 24, 2002, on PBS]. I'm actually within the video, that Hudson—I think I'm in part two. They had to drop a whole segment because I could not find—I had some pictures of me as a child on the Hudson. So the first segment, you had John Cronin, Riverkeeper, others, because they had their pictures. I couldn't find mine. And so, there's this picture. Eventually, when they finally were about to—I found the picture of me in 1967 on the Hudson River, on Peekskill Waterfront.

05-02:01:27

Mair: And, so the much more robust, ten-minute piece that they would have had Arbor Hill in the bigger picture, that got dropped. But the other piece of the environmental threat and risk, that piece stayed.

05-02:01:40

Eardley-Pryor: Became part of a Bill Moyers special?

05-02:01:41

Mair: It became part of a Bill Moyers special. So, that moment was very powerful because this is a good example of when early EJ [environmental justice] meets Sierra Club meets pulling together the Sierra Club action, but also in service to disempowered people of color, [all] came together and actually had a very powerful moment.

And then that put fire behind the governor, because then we were then leveraging that to push Governor Pataki who—again, Peekskill homeboy. [We] said, “Listen.” His commissioner then was John Cahill. They were worried about GE. I go, “Look, what we can do right here with the cleanup, they’re going to have to create new technology to clean up the Hudson. And whatever they clean up, they’re going to have the patents for. And it could be used for other rivers around the country.” And, I told him, I says, “John, this is going to be at least a \$10 billion project. That means they’ve got to manufacture the barges here. They’ve got to clean the sand here and the sediment here. That’s got to all be processed here.” I said, “Just think of the thousands of jobs that that means because of the settlement.”

And that economic argument really registered with Cahill. And Cahill took that argument back to Governor Pataki. I’d like to believe that that was the argument that pushed him—a Republican is usually pro-business and very pro-GE. Jack Welch, at that time, was pulling out the stops and arguments that the river is cleaning itself.

05-02:03:04

Eardley-Pryor: Was Welch from GE?

05-02:03:06

Mair: GE. He was then the CEO of GE, Jack Welch. And I tell people, that fight created a number of millionaires, everything from media companies that were trying to proffer the argument that, “Leave the river alone. It’s taking care of itself,” which is nonsense. And, I think the line that I used in the hearing is, “It’s like you’re taking a dump in the middle of your room and just saying, ‘Leave it alone. It’ll take care of itself.’” And I think that’s in the footage also, the Bill Moyers special. But it’s like any time you make a mess. “Oh, leave it alone. You ain’t got to clean it up.”

05-02:03:43

Eardley-Pryor: This sounds like this was a multi-year campaign.

05-02:03:46

Mair:

It was a multi-year campaign, but it ended up leading to a consent order, ordering GE, which is what GE did not want—being held accountable, being held accountable for destroying, as they say, and damaging a natural resource. And so, it's still being debated right now. They're still working on the Natural Resources Act claim against GE over the river. It's still active.

But the point of getting that argument out there, but also getting the argument of subsistence fishermen, getting the fact that there's a cultural heritage dependency, a human dependency upon the river. And being able to pull in my heritage from South Carolina and that my heritage actually puts me at a risk of—just fathers and sons fishing, and that poor people who don't get food stamps but go out and fish instead of getting food, this is a big piece. It pulled the politicians in.

05-02:04:49

Eardley-Pryor:

On that point of heritage and culture, something I've heard you talk about a lot is also the importance of monuments, and how that gives a sense of identity for people. I've seen a photo that's some sort of PCB historic marker. Does that ring a bell? Was there some sort of monument that came out of this settlement?

05-02:05:07

Mair:

Well, I don't think there—we did. We had signs that we were putting up with regards to the fish consumption. We were a part of the fish—we had a boat. We had two boats going from Albany from New York City putting up PCB advisories. There was no big-dollar monument settlement I do know of for Fort Edward.

05-02:05:28

Eardley-Pryor:

In my mind I have a picture of one of those little historic markers.

05-02:05:33

Mair:

There might have been something, but I was not so much a part of that as opposed to—the most important thing, was the creation of a coalition of EJ [environmental justice] and grassroots groups called the Friends of Clean Hudson, which was formed at 200 Henry Johnson Boulevard, in the [Arbor Hill] Environmental Justice offices.

So, it took the behavior—because most environmental organizations behave like corporations on Wall Street, competing against each other, trying to one-up each other, rather than collaborating, which is basically how church and poor communities—we work through collaboration. Our power is through collaboration and cooperation. The corporate behavior of “I want to do it on my own, it's about me,” like our President Donald Trump: “If it's not about me, I don't want to deal with it.” So, through collaboration you actually bring about change.

And so, we ended up pulling everybody together right at 200 Henry Johnson, our offices, and got people on the same page. And, from there, Friends of Clean Hudson, or FOCH—and I think the poster for that is up in the Sierra Club offices. So, that should be retained because that was actually organized as part of our campaign. And that was organized at 200 Henry Johnson. Every time we had the big fish-ins or “Fishing for Justice,” that banner was what stood behind us. So, you’ll see some of the earlier press footage with that Sierra Club banner.

And that was financed by the Sierra Club. The campaign was financed by the Sierra Club. The action was by the environmental justice activists, and later, deeper action to organize—to force—the ultimate cleanup and basically for the consent order, was organized and mobilized by Chris Ballantyne.

05-02:07:15

Mair:

Let me give you a quick example of those hearings, because basically the EPA had to hold hearings up and down the Hudson River and bring in communities. And so, my older daughters, they were able to bring in their biology honor classes. And what Chris did was like—it was pizza and T-shirts, what you can get kids to do for pizza and T-shirts! So, we had all these kids with the “Clean up the Hudson” red shirts. And so, we had all these biology honor students. So, we were bringing all these youth. And my daughter, my kids, were all engaged, kids from Field of Dreams. We had them all in. They bused them up to the hearing. And my ex-wife, Maria, we staged it so she would give her testimony in Spanish. And this is again that power.

05-02:07:58

Eardley-Pryor:

Why?

05-02:07:59

Mair:

Well, because a lot of the Hispanic people fish—and Lent and on Friday, a lot of Hispanics are Catholic. They’re very fiercely independent. And they go out. If you go right now, down to this day, on most waterways in metropolitan Manhattan, look at how many Hispanic men and women have their reels cast into the Hudson River, the East River, some of the most polluted waterways, because their culture and heritage, this is what they’ve been doing for generations. This is what’s been passed on. And that puts them at unique risk.

So, by testifying in Spanish, it showed an immediate deficiency in the so-called notices that GE has been promising that it’s giving out. It’s saying, “We’ve notified people. We’ve posted things in newspapers.” And so, when you have somebody speaking in Spanish saying, “No, I didn’t get it in—and I read the”—she was going through all the Hispanic newspapers and all the services. And she’s giving her testimony in Spanish.

And, naturally, being up in redneck Fort Edward area, this is that area by the Schroon River where I was later assaulted by a bunch of racists—fighting

against racism in the Adirondacks, which we'll talk about later. But the point is that they started yelling, "Speak English."

05-02:09:18

Eardley-Pryor: To Maria?

05-02:09:19

Mair: They started yelling from the audience, "Speak English! We don't understand you! Speak English!" And what happened was the guys, the men and women, the scientists from the EPA and the various agencies that were right there doing the investigation, they were feverishly writing down because they got it. They got it, that there are populations that are vulnerable and at risk, and this is how they're being—so, they got the environmental justice impact.

Because there was already the NEJAC [National Environmental Justice Advisory Council, a federal advisory committee to EPA established in 1993], and there's all this pressure on them to, as they say—the Executive Order 12898 was already in power. [E.O 12898: Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations, signed by President Clinton in 1994.]

05-02:09:53

Mair: And so now, they are operating under that, and so they can actually see environmental racism unfold right before their eyes—by them attacking her [Maria] for merely speaking Spanish and just saying, "Where is my protections? Where is my rights?" But the fact that there was no way for the system to respond to her needs. And this is a big, diverse state.

So, up in Fort Edward, where it's all white, it's okay to speak English. But as you get from, as they say, from Albany south, bilingual education is important, and as you got down by Manhattan—even French, because you've got the Creole, the Haitian communities; you've got the [Jamaican] Patois; you've got a whole bunch of Chinese and eastern Europeans. So, they realized a significant deficiency, and that really helped shape their findings and saying that, "No, you've got to clean this up. And, more importantly, the advisories have to be in different languages."

But again, this was classic Sierra Club organizing, with a Sierra Club organizer coming in and giving us good targets and helping us mobilize in getting the kids. And the Sierra Club paid for the organizing fund, paid for the transportation to get the population and the community there. And this is the thing that shows you, through diversity and inclusion we were having these huge successes and wins.

05-02:11:09

Mair: But, unfortunately, that eventually would fall off. But, that's another part of the internal struggle of the Sierra Club—dealing with white privilege and racism playing out—because I eventually became [chair] of the Atlantic

chapter. And, we were pushing through a lot of actions. And as [chair], you get to do a number of things. And, one of the unfortunate pieces was that we had that group from New York City, which was one of the sources of tension early on, raise their heads to take revenge because they were suspended.

05-02:11:51

Eardley-Pryor: Wait. I'm not following. So, you're chair of the Atlantic chapter for the New York State.

05-02:11:57

Mair: That's correct.

05-02:11:58

Eardley-Pryor: And the [Sierra Club] group down in Manhattan, what did they want revenge for?

05-02:12:03

Mair: Well, to step back a little bit, the piece that I missed and that I unfortunately glossed over that really pushed for us to have this need to come together, there was a division.

05-02:12:15

Eardley-Pryor: This is why Bruce Hamilton was coming in to try to unite the Atlanta chapter?

05-02:12:17

Mair: Why Bruce Hamilton was coming, because there was an internal conflict within the Atlantic chapter over the power of—because the Atlantic chapter, the way they set up members for the ExCom was through proportional population representation. So, upstate, because it has less population, got less representatives. Downstate, New York City, got more representatives because it had more population.

05-02:12:41

Eardley-Pryor: More members?

05-02:12:42

Mair: Exactly. Even though most of that board from downstate was all white, but yet they claim to represent New York City. So, there was no diversity.

05-02:12:54

Eardley-Pryor: This is part of the tensions, why the Atlantic chapter needed national support.

05-02:12:55

Mair: This was part of the tension. And when it came to conservation work, or distributing conservation work evenly throughout the state, there was a fight over the resources, because they kept spending everything in the metropolitan area and nothing upstate. And again, the biggest recreational assets are upstate. And the big environmental threats, like the Hudson River, run the length of the state, or the Mohawk River.

So, what happened was that the New York City group engaged in an illegal mailing because it was the campaign season, what they call the March mailing window. Outside of that, national does its fundraising. So, this is the way the national and state chapters divide up on how and when they can do mailings to raise revenue so they don't bump into one another. New York City decided to, on its own, ignore national rules and go out and do its own mailing.

And this is in the wake of then, I believe, Rhea Jezer was the [Atlantic] chapter chair at that time, saying, "No, you can't do it." So they went out and did it anyway. And, so a complaint violation was filed, because not only did they do that fundraising, they received it through, I think, a local neighborhood association or some other group that was not even the Sierra Club. So, they did a Sierra Club fundraising to members, and money came in not to the Club, and then distributed to them. It did not come to the [Atlantic] chapter chair; it actually went to some entity, so they had to bypass—which is basically mail fraud. Now, somebody may, if there's an attorney listening to this, they say, "We disagree with that." Well, the point of the matter is that if you're raising it—

05-02:14:37

Eardley-Pryor: This is what caused the tensions?

05-02:14:38

Mair: Yeah, it caused huge tension. And [because of] that illicit fundraiser, they were sanctioned. The New York City group was suspended, the entire New York City, because they all voted for this thing. Some of them did not, but in short the whole group, because it occurred on their watch, they were suspended—because it was that serious that national felt that if the Republicans had investigated, what have you, it could damage the whole Club. All you need is one chapter or one group to act up. And if you're engaging in national litigation against big corporate polluters, and they find out this kind of activity's going on in a not-for-profit, they can take that one aberrant strand and destroy a whole organization. So the Club did the right thing in suspending them.

05-02:15:20

Eardley-Pryor: And that was '98 or so, late nineties?

05-02:15:24

Mair: Yeah, that was in the nineties. And so, that was that period within the late—yeah, 1999, '98, '99 area.

05-02:15:36

Eardley-Pryor: So then you—take me to, you're now the chair of the Atlantic chapter.

05-02:15:39

Mair: Right. So, these guys had to serve as—

05-02:15:41

Eardley-Pryor: And New York City is now back in the fold.

05-02:15:43

Mair: Yeah. They had a one-year, roughly one- or two-year suspension, and now they're back. And you try to now blend them back in. And part of it, again, is this conservation activity for us to come together as a kumbaya. And so, as part of that effort, I wanted to say, rather than getting us—I invited one of the former suspended members to be my vice-chair. So, the smart thing to do—

05-02:16:10

Eardley-Pryor: To your rivals—

05-02:16:11

Mair: “Come on.” I had no animosity, what have you. So as a form of goodwill, that was received well. But, the main thing is that it gave—again, it's that trust thing. You've got to trust people. You've got to be that frog to allow that scorpion on your back. And it's kind of interesting, because what happened was enough of them—and again, from this proportional representation, they had a lot of them. So, we always tried to mobilize and make sure as many of the Board members are present, so we did not have a situation where all of one group—literally one group—can dominate service to the entire state.

So, it just so happened that a [Atlantic chapter] meeting occurred within June, right in the week of high school graduation. So I had to be away at my daughter's high school graduation. And so had a number of other chapter leaders. And so, it just was at that summer meeting where that vice-president decided to go off script, because now they had a majority. Even though they had an agenda, they then voted out that agenda and then voted in their agenda. And they proceeded to do a number of things that democratically altered, fundamentally, the way the chapter did business. Because now all of a sudden you now had something that passed, and you had to act on.

05-02:17:44

Mair: And, even though it was done in a way that could have been challenged at national, but the thing is I had EJ [environmental justice] organizations and EJ duties. And I said, “Well, this isn't what I'm going to invest in my time, in this clownery.” And, I said, “Let me just serve out my year, because this is kind of ridiculous,” because there's three hats I was wearing. I had my national EJ [environmental justice] role; and the volunteer role; I had my state chapter role. Plus, I was running a youth baseball program; I was running an open space program; I was running two not-for-profit organizations. And then on top of that, I was servicing the national environmental justice movement as one of the lead founders and activists and thought leaders within it.

05-02:18:32

Eardley-Pryor: And had kids graduating from high school.

05-02:18:34

Mair: So, I could not have a bunch of spoiled rich white folks, who can't get their act together, to suck the oxygen out of the room and just really waste my time.

05-02:18:44

Eardley-Pryor: You said June. What year are we talking that this is happening? When did your daughters graduate from high school?

05-02:18:50

Mair: Marjana was 2001. So, it was a period that, when my tenure ended, they did another thing, too. They had to do the endorsements for governor. Governor Pataki was thinking about running again against H. Carl McCall, who's an African-American comptroller for the state of New York. And so, another faction then, from New York City, dominated something called the PolCom [Political Committee]. And, they had to try to skew the outcome without going through the process of—you basically screen candidates. Both candidates come and get interviewed by the political community. They do presentations. They do presentations for the Board. And then the Board votes on them—that simple.

So, what these individuals wanted to do was skip that altogether and just nominate H. Carl McCall. And the reason they were saying was that because I worked for the state that I had a conflict of interest, because I'm being paid by the state of New York; so I'm therefore being paid to represent George Pataki, which is the most absurd logic. Again, that was the argument. But there were a number of things going on. It was classic bigotry, in my opinion, because they weren't doing this to other candidates. And they never breeched process this way. So, my point was that, "No, we should go forward [and screen both candidates]."

05-02:20:19

Mair: And I think Jennifer Ferenstein was the president of the Club, so it was under her watch. And so, she was a former New York Atlantic chapter member. And she was from the Metro area. So, she had to deal with these guys when she was here. So, the squeaky wheel gets the grease. This is how they dealt with New York. And so, since I'm reasonable in thinking, they go, "Well, heck, Aaron. We want to let this matter get resolved." Because what happened was they endorsed him.

And then I immediately contacted the press and just told them, I says, "Well, yes, the Sierra Club endorsed H. Carl McCall. But that's because they didn't follow the process and endorse"—I said, "They did not give Governor Pataki a fair access to the process." And I pointed out the deficiencies. I says, "Number one, if we're judging people by environmental records, Pataki basically gave New York state one million acres of open space, new." I said, "Unprecedented—no other governor has done that." I'm not saying how good he is on other policies, but judging him by his environmental record, here's what he did. But also he was the guy that worked with us on the [Hudson

River cleanup] settlement. I said, “It was a Democrat that we had to sue and didn’t settle.” I said, “And the Republican closed the deal.”

05-02:21:41

Mair:

So, in short, they gave me a gag order to let the endorsement—I said, “The endorsement stood.” But they felt that my comments on pointing out the deficiencies in the endorsement was undermining the endorsement. But, H. Carl McCall was smart enough, because a lot of the African-American EJ [environmental justice] activists in New York City got to him and said, “You’d better not take that.” And so, he actually ended up rejecting the endorsement. Because my Harlem allies in the EJ [environmental justice] movement told them, “You’re not going to do this. You’re not going to embarrass an African-American leader with an environmental organization, because these white guys set him up.” And, Carl walked away from the endorsement. So, that was the end of my [chairmanship], that year [in 2002].

05-02:22:31

Eardley-Pryor:

Chairmanship of the Atlantic chapter?

05-02:22:33

Mair:

Yes, the chairmanship of the Atlantic chapter. And then I just went—after that year, I think I stayed on the board for one more year, on the [Atlantic] chapter board. But then I just went to the group, and I went to mainly leaving my activism at the national level rather than at the chapter level. Because again, it was consuming too much time.

05-02:22:55

Eardley-Pryor:

You have plenty of other things.

05-02:22:56

Mair:

And I had plenty of other things to do.

05-02:22:57

Eardley-Pryor:

You said in 2000, around. This is early 2000s when this happens?

05-02:23:00

Mair:

Yeah.

05-02:23:01

Eardley-Pryor:

I have a note here also that in the wake of September 11, 2001 in New York, you did work down at the World Trade Center, disaster recovery work.

05-02:23:11

Mair:

So, again, in the wake of that, we had the tragedy.

05-02:23:16

Eardley-Pryor:

Where were you on 9/11?

05-02:23:18

Mair:

Where was I?

05-02:23:18

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. What's your memory?

05-02:23:19

Mair:

On the morning, I remember walking into my office at One Commerce Plaza. And, my boss said, "Aaron." He called me in and said, "Did you see what happened?" And I said, "What?" Because everybody was down at his office. And I came down, and the World Trade Center, the North Tower was in flames. And my blood went cold because I knew my cousin worked at the North Tower. My father's brother's fourth-oldest child, Linda Mair Grayling. And, as I mentioned, we have family reunions and family gatherings. And so, we had a family gathering, and a lot of the Mairs, as I told you, attended the McKenzie gatherings.

And all of a sudden I'm looking at the North Tower, and I knew that my cousin worked there. And it's on fire. And so I said, "Hey, where's this at? What's going on?" And they were barking out the details to me. And I called over to SEMO, which is the State Emergency Management Office, to ask for more details. What's going on? And, that's when I got a little bit of a confidential briefing as to what happened and where the plane had struck. And I knew that she worked on those upper floors, and the first plane struck just below the floor that she was working on.

And so, I contacted the various bosses, and they found that there was a call for people with strategic skills. Because what happened was the infrastructure right around that one, building seven [7 World Trade Center], there was a worry about risk. And so, in short, the first tower came down. I remember it coming down. And then the second tower came down. And then shortly after that, building seven [7 World Trade Center] collapsed. And so, by that evening, that's when they started calling for people with what they call strategic skills. Whether you're an emergency first responder—

05-02:25:34

Eardley-Pryor: "They" being the state [of New York]?

05-02:25:35

Mair:

The state, yes. The state called for people with strategic skills. And one of those strategic skills that they needed was people who made maps and who had GIS [Geographic Information System] expertise and experience. Why? Because in building seven [7 World Trade Center] existed all of the records and backup records and schematics and blueprints for just about every single building in Manhattan, especially lower Manhattan. And so, when that building collapsed and went up in flames, they had this massive crisis. And they had no blueprints, diagrams, or anything of that whole lower Manhattan area.

So, I was sent down as part of the team to help redo those maps. And so, at that point you didn't have to be an engineer. You needed to have sufficient

skill. And they had engineers and other people there. So, we literally were laying out, from as-builts and other historic maps and records, we were really what we called—the group that I worked with was called Deep Infrastructure.

And, my piece with the group was subfloors, so things at street level and below. And that was important because where they had to place the cranes and heavy equipment to take out debris, they had to know that they were not putting their braces down on any hollow areas. The last thing you want to do is have a heavy crane lifting up debris and it's on top of a hollow area and it collapses and falls underground. So, New York City is honeycombed. And the Deep Infrastructure group was basically charged with mapping those places and risks so that they can get in.

05-02:27:00

Mair:

That, plus the recovery grids and rescue grids that they had to basically give to first responders. They had to at least have those blueprints, so they could assign police and firemen and other rescue workers to those grids. And so, we had to produce those recovery grids and those maps. So, a lot of the logistics and mapping that they needed to support emergency rescue work, recovery work and debris removal, that fell to guys like me and the Deep Infrastructure team.

05-02:27:42

Eardley-Pryor:

Did you have to go down to New York for that work?

05-02:27:44

Mair:

I had to go down to Manhattan. In fact, that evening, the evening of the 11th, I was in an automobile en route to Manhattan. When I got to Manhattan and checked in, they assigned an encon officer [environmental conservation police officer from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation] to me. And that encon officer stayed with me pretty much throughout the day. And, they got me—I stayed at my mother-in-law's in The Bronx. And so, they had the cop car that would pick me up in the morning and take me over to Manhattan. So, when people figured out what I was doing, because they'd see the cop car come there—

05-02:28:27

Eardley-Pryor:

This is Maria's mom in The Bronx?

05-02:28:28

Mair:

Maria's mother, yeah, Gladys Pacheco. So, I would go from the south Bronx to lower Manhattan. So, when the word got out that I was one of the emergency workers, one of the touching moments was getting up one morning, and all the neighbors were out there clapping as myself and the cop car were going off to work. And they literally did that for most of the time that I was there.

The work was hard, and it was grueling. But it was also, again, from a point of toxicity and exposure and risk, it's probably the most toxic environment that I

have ever worked in. My family feels that I have some, because I have this cough. But so far I haven't had any of the major side effects. And so, the issues of going there and working during the days. And then at least five hours in the evening, going down to the debris field and just helping out, pulling out stuff, getting the bucket, scooping stuff, just helping. Just like the countless volunteers that were there cutting and removing debris.

So, that was my days. And, I'm trying to think of Terry's last name, the DEC [Department of Environmental Conservation] officer that they had stationed with me. But, Terry, he was my sidekick through it. And he was like, "Aaron, it's time to go. Did you get some sleep?" He was like, "Did you take a pee break?" It was kind of interesting. And it's fascinating because I had this DEC cop, of all people, as my wingman. And, I'll send you pictures of Terry and me from Ground Zero.

05-02:30:23

Eardley-Pryor: And you knew your cousin Linda—?

05-02:30:26

Mair: Yes. We found Linda about three weeks in, her remains.

05-02:30:34

Eardley-Pryor: You literally found her?

05-02:30:35

Mair: Well, I didn't find her. She was found, and then I had to look at what the pieces were. And so, they found her remains. Her sister gave a biological sample, and that sample was matched. And that confirmed it. But, when we did the burial, it was not the full casket at that point, because earlier on when they set the funeral—and one of the things that came out, that was when the family on my paternal side—because they knew I was the genealogist and family historian for my mother's side. That was where they asked me to formally do that work for my paternal side. So, there was some good that came out of that, in that I formally started doing the things that I do for my mom's side of the family and the work that's been passed on to me by my aunt Leola Ballenger, I now do in the wake and honor of Linda's memory.

It's kind of touching in the sense that the *New York Times* was down at Yankee Stadium during one of the early memorials—actually, one of the first early open memorials for families and victims. And, they saw me over the corner, man. I was bawling like a baby. I had Linda's picture. And, the guy came up to me, and he's talking to me. He said, "Do you mind if I sit here and talk?" So, I had a reporter sitting next to me, asking me. He says, "What's your memory?" I talked about the Bad Air Fund, how we would go from Peekskill to Harlem, and how we would all crash at my grandmother's, Linda, all of us.

And, one of the world's moments was summers, where Grandma's was like this big day care camp. And we played hot foot bingo, and it was this thing. The amazing thing is we did some dumb things as kids, and luckily we didn't burn the house down.

05-02:32:32

Eardley-Pryor: What was hot foot bingo?

05-02:32:33

Mair: Hot foot. If you ever seen "The Little Rascals," it's where guys are sleeping in the bed, or sleeping and their foot is sticking out. And you put a match between their toes, a little stick match, and you light it. And, you guys are sitting back in the corner, and then all of a sudden the thing will burn up, and it burns their toes, and you just watched them jump up and down. And you sit there and laugh like an idiot. And then, you never think about three steps later that you're going to get yours. And so, for the one or two times I did it—and it might have been more—I definitely got mine.

But, that amongst many things—and, you just have these great memories. She [Linda] was a beautiful young woman. She was my brother Ricky's wife's, Rose Buffalo's, matron of honor in their wedding. She's just a very, very beautiful young woman.

And, she had a daughter, Isa Setsu Martin. And, Isa—because again, Marjana, she was very touched and moved by this, and again, my daughters knew their cousin. [Majana] named her—my granddaughter's named Isa. So, it's one way of honoring her but also lifting up her spirit to have—you lost your mother, but you have this other cousin now that's also carrying your name. And it meant a lot to her. But, a lot of that family moved from Manhattan to Atlanta, Georgia, because the pain of living in Manhattan is just too much. And so, they now live in [Atlanta].

05-02:34:09

Mair: But for me, I had to tell my father. I had to tell my father. I was the one to formally break the news to the family about her passing and about pretty much what she had to endure, what the impact where the plane went, where it hit. And I had to tell them. I says, "From where she was at, and they had those backup generators with those gallons, like 2,000-gallon tanks at that area, so that jet fuel hitting that stuff combining on that floor," I said, "Dad, it's probably like a massive gas pump. So, more than likely, looking at the destruction, it was instant." And that meant a lot to my dad.

But, he was all broke up. And he was both worried, but he was very proud again. He was proud when I was in the Navy and serving, but he really was proud and he took a lot of comfort in the fact that I was there at Ground Zero, that at least somebody was there. At least a family member was—the worst thing you can ever feel is that a family member died somewhere alone, and nobody was around. So, that meant a lot to the family.

05-02:35:34

Mair: But, it was a very interesting time. A lot of debate within the [Sierra Club's] Atlantic chapter about the toxics and what was being exposed. And then, I tried to lend my expertise and understanding of what was happening in real time to the chapter. But be it as it may, that amongst many of the things—so, my end of my [chairmanship] rounded out in the tragedy that was 9/11.

So when I walked away [from the Atlantic chapter], I just devoted most of my time then on with the national [Sierra Club] work. Because a lot of the grassroots work was basically sliding into more acrimony, but really intolerance. I think a lot of people were upset still that somebody that didn't look like them was in one of the chapters. So, I went to national because that's where the action was.

05-02:36:25

Eardley-Pryor: Let's take a break here and move into that in just a bit.

(break in audio)

05-02:36:29

Eardley-Pryor: Okay, Aaron. One of the things you transition away from—not away from, but then step into, is from the [regional Sierra Club] Atlantic chapter work to then focusing on more of the [Sierra Club's] national-scale environmental justice work. A huge, huge moment that happens in the environmental justice work is 2002, the second [National] People of Color Environmental [Leadership] Summit. What happens there?

05-02:36:54

Mair: Well, it's a very powerful moment on a number of levels, because I'm moving up and marrying not only my national environmental justice movement building work. Now, I'm more of a senior player. People now are aware of my [ANSWERS incinerator] settlement and my resources.

05-02:37:14

Eardley-Pryor: And the PCBs campaign is moving forward.

05-02:37:14

Mair: And the PCB campaign. A lot of things have come forward that has given a lot of notoriety. A lot of the groups and movements are mainly dealing with the issues that they started with from day one. They still hadn't progressed with a lot of their work. And so, you're trying to pass and share your knowledge and tactics and tools by which you were successful.

One of the things that I did do, which is really fascinating, is that by that time I became aware of the Sierra Club strategic manual [then the *Sierra Club Grassroots Organizing Training Manual*; now the *Sierra Club Movement Organizing Manuel*, revised 2016]. This is their activist manual. This is the manual that had everything in it from how to set up a campaign, how you do your posters, your press releases—the little green book. And, I was giving that

thing out like hotcakes. I was passing it out to every EJ [environmental justice] group.

I says, “Listen. You don’t need a million dollars, but you need a million activists. And if all your activists, if 100 of your activists deployed these tools and tactics, I guarantee you’re going to have some breakthrough. But at a minimum, you would be quite empowered. But, this will help you leaps and bounds.”

Because I kind of knew where they were in a lot of their strategies and their tactics that they were using. They were at where I was at, at the beginning. But, what was different is that they did not have the academic tool set or skill set. They were always missing things that I would take for granted. So the Sierra Club training manual [*Sierra Club Grassroots Organizing Training Manual*] was one of the things, by the time of the second Sierra Club summit, was a book I was giving out. It was like a necessary—

05-02:38:45

Eardley-Pryor: Second [National] People of Color [Environmental Leadership] Summit, not the Sierra Club summit.

05-02:38:48

Mair: I’m sorry, the second People of Color summit. But I’m conflating Sierra Club manual with the [Second National People of Color Environmental Leadership] Summit because I was giving those things out.

05-02:38:55

Eardley-Pryor: At the Summit?

05-02:38:56

Mair: At the Summit, oh yeah. I mean, the thing is that one of the memberships in the Sierra Club, what it affords you is access to its tool kits and its library. And what most of the EJ [environmental justice] movement was deficient in is its tool kits. Now, while it was definitely pressing the Sierra Club to, as they say, to become diversified—because, again, if your movements are claiming to speak on behalf of humanity and the planets and all groups, then you should be diverse. You should be including people. And you more importantly need to share the resources. A lot of those [big national environmental] groups did not understand. It’s just not the way it worked. I understand academically and intellectually what they were saying and what they’re asking.

But, in dealing in the space of not-for-profit organizations, sovereign selves, organizations are like human beings. Listen, I care about my brother that’s starving and doesn’t have anything on the corner. But I’m not going to go out and empty my bank account to show solidarity with them. What I will do is donate and give to programs and things that may help alleviate that condition and try to find pathways so that he or she can be productive and engage and empower themselves and get to a point where they make themselves whole.

And again, reminding groups that it wasn't the Sierra Club that was the source or the environmental groups in general that was the source of their victimhood, meaning that that's not why—

05-02:40:19

Eardley-Pryor: The EJ [environmental justice] groups' victimhood?

05-02:40:20

Mair: [Yes,] EJ groups. [The big environmental groups like the Sierra Club], they're not the ones that sited the polluting facilities, et cetera. While they may have bogarted aid when they could be of use and could be of help, but they were not the enemy.

05-02:40:30

Eardley-Pryor: Before the 2002 second [National] People of Color Environmental [Leadership] Summit, what had the Sierra Club done in the EJ [environmental justice] field?

05-02:4

Mair: Very little. It had a staff person, John McCown [hired by Sierra Club in 1993 as its first National Environmental Justice Coordinator.]. And John McCown, at that particular point in time, had led the organization to believe that he was an authentic voice and grassroots player and that he had a deep connection, that he was really on the ground in the EJ [environmental justice] movement.

05-02:40:59

Eardley-Pryor: But he was not, is what I'm hearing from you?

05-02:41:02

Mair: Well, it's hard to say that he was not. But, what John wasn't, he was not a strategic thinker, player, and activist in what I knew to be the environmental justice movement. Because number one, one of the critical things that brought you to the table was, what's your skin in the game, meaning that not as a volunteer. Everybody there had a person—themselves or family or an entire community—that they literally were losing sleep over and still fighting to save them. Their missions to be part of these gatherings were not vacations. But it was, every way, to go out and get tools and tactics so that they can go back and be more efficient fighters where they were.

05-02:41:53

Eardley-Pryor: And the other EJ [environmental justice] organizations—like yours, and other people, and part of that—saw that, at least in their eyes, John was not?

05-02:42:02

Mair: They saw John as really an agent of a mainstream group that really has not committed itself to environmental justice and really was not a strategic partner and ally, and in short, which meant that he was a poseur. What John also failed to communicate, really, also was how the Sierra Club could have been an ally and help really move Sierra Club strategically in a position to be an asset.

For example, when the Sierra Club received its [David] Gelbaum funding, John should have been doing everything in his power to try to—just like baseball or any sports team—you try to recruit pros away from the other team. You try to recruit people into the team. So, when the Sierra Club was staffing up to do its environmental justice program, John could have been a very powerful asset to bring in people from these impacted communities from around the country to help staff up this program, which would have had two purposes.

A, it would have given people some income, because a lot of these communities were poor people. They were poor in money, but they had a lot of intelligence in what they were doing. And I think their technology and the way they did things could have been very powerful and liberating for the Club. So, it would have been a technology and an intellectual exchange of skills that would have helped the Club in its activist arsenal, but also brought back resources to communities.

05-02:43:33

Mair:

But at the same token, create a pipeline within the community of activists who now start stepping into this mainstream environmental organization, and to broaden their horizon. Because you grew up in a poor community, that means your opportunities and things that you were not exposed to are vast. And so, this is a huge bridge, a bidirectional—it was not a one-way street. And John could have been a significant king maker in facilitating that bidirectional growth within the movement as well as the Sierra Club.

I just think that John got himself a decent salary, great compensation, and a huge—traveling all over the country. John was making just about every meeting that they called. Now, I would make maybe ten percent of them in a year. But John was there, because that was his job. And so, for those of us who were advocates, we did not have that luxury. So, whenever those meetings, those national meetings were, you just picked and chose which ones you strategically needed to be at.

05-02:44:39

Mair:

So, I was strategically at those [national meetings] that were on movement building. Because, as a volunteer within the Sierra Club's environmental justice program, mine was trying to build—sort of like when you build a bridge. You've got to build the bulkheads on both sides of the river. And so, I'm going back and forth to the river building those bulkheads. And then, before I lay the decking and the connective—think of the Brooklyn Bridge, think of Mr. Roebling laying out that Brooklyn Bridge and how that came together. There's a lot of stuff. You don't lay out decking first. You've got to get those bulkheads up.

And that was the work that I saw myself intentionally doing, because I also knew that the communities needed the resources of the Sierra Club. But I also

had enough respect that the Sierra Club and the various groups and chapters—and one of the benefits of coming to the Sierra Club, representing a chapter, and representing a group within a chapter, I got to know about the idiosyncratic needs of the various grassroots volunteers. I became intimately aware of their lives and their struggles and their needs and how they came into the movement.

05-02:45:48

Mair:

And because I grew up in Peekskill, New York, I had a similar working class background as most of the whites. And so, unlike a lot of the Blacks in the Sierra Club movement who grew up in communities that were absolute communities of color, mine was a commute and seasonal experience in that regard. Because as a child, I would commute and go to New York City and be in Harlem. But even when in Harlem, my grandmother still would take me out to these diverse places—I mean, the Museum of Natural History, the Botanical Garden, The Bronx Zoo. So, you still had—was not totally ghettoized, but when you were there you were—so you had that exclusive. Where if you went down south, you just were in the Black community.

So, I had a range of exposure and experiences that allowed me to move within the Sierra Club. But growing up in northern Westchester, hunting, angling, fishing, I was just like the average white working class sportsman in there. So, I could relate because I had—

05-02:46:50

Eardley-Pryor: You yourself were a bridge.

05-02:46:52

Mair: Hmm?

05-02:46:52

Eardley-Pryor: You were a bridge between those.

05-02:46:54

Mair: Yes.

05-02:46:55

Eardley-Pryor: And so, as you're going into the 2002 [second National People of Color Environmental Leadership] Summit, you're also a bridge here, too. You are a member of the Sierra Club. You're involved highly in the New York chapter.

05-02:47:05

Mair: The bulkheads were up. The bulkheads were up.

05-02:47:07

Eardley-Pryor: And, you have the Arbor Hill Environmental Justice Corp. that you're representing.

05-02:47:12

Mair: Yes, the bulkheads were up, and they were anchored firm. And they were anchored. My environmental justice bulkhead was anchored firmly, solidly, within the EJ [environmental justice] movement. We won a major victory. At that time, we were one of two major EJ [environmental justice] groups that they could ever point to.

05-02:47:28

Eardley-Pryor: WE ACT being the other one?

05-02:47:29

Mair: West Harlem Environmental [Action, Inc., (WE ACT for Environmental Justice)], and Arbor Hill Environmental Justice. That was power. That was power. “How did you do this? What were your legal—how did you put together a strategy?” The demographics of our community were very much a part of the demographics of every community around that table. So, that was without question.

05-02:47:49

Eardley-Pryor: So you’re wearing multiple hats at the [second National People of Color Environmental Leadership] Summit?

05-02:47:50

Mair: So you’re wearing multiple hats. And at the same token, within the Sierra Club EJ [environmental justice] program, here I’m working with Bob Bingaman, John McCown, Norma Ramos, who he hired from New York City, which is—she was actually—I think she might have been in the Sierra Club New York City group. I can’t recall.

But Norma Ramos was also from an EJ [environmental justice] group within New York City. And I’m not sure whether it was Nos Quedamos or UPROSE, but I know that she was from either one—Nos Quedamos/We Stay. A woman, Yolanda Rivera, beautiful woman, she died of an asthmatic attack. Because one of the big issues was chronic asthma because of the particulate on buses and bus depots as well as these waste treatment transfer stations. And her neighborhood was one of those areas that was saturated with a lot of particulate. And, for a decade I knew a very great soul. And she actually died of asthma. I think Norma Ramos might have been—I could be wrong, but in short her credibility was there. But, she was hired as one of the staff, she was with the Sierra Club. Just imagine this space. So, you go there.

05-02:49:10

Eardley-Pryor: “There” is [Washington] DC? Is this where the [second National People of Color Environmental Leadership] Summit is?

05-02:49:12

Mair: This is Washington, DC. And so, instead of the collaborative nature like the first one, here you had a number of strategic, old-time activism—old time meaning within the past ten, almost ten years. But it’s, to me, still like a short

window. But, the power dynamics was that some groups were getting a lot of national and international recognition. And that meant grants and resources were flowing to them much more readily than other folks. And they were benefiting and prospering, and some of them were the big organizers of the event.

05-02:49:55

Eardley-Pryor: Who were some of the people, just so I can get a sense of other organizations that you were interacting with or seeing as peers or models?

05-02:50:00

Mair: You had New York City Environmental Justice Alliance [NYC-EJA]. You had SOC [Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice]. You had the Southwest Environmental Justice Coalition [SouthWest Organizing Project (SWOP)]. You had the Indigenous Action [Indigenous Environmental Network]—it was Tom Goldtooth. It was kind of weird because all of our groups were founded near about the same time. This is when Tom Goldtooth was just—his tooth wasn't golden yet—but Tom, you had a whole range of people. You had the delegations from Louisiana and Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina. People from the Zuni Nation out in New Mexico were dealing with Peabody Coal. Oh, goodness, you just had folks from Appalachia there.

You had a whole youth delegation that came down, like two buses of kids, and just crashed. They just brought them. A lot of the folks—because you had to send in fees, I remember there was some registration fees—but not everybody had it. And you had to pay for your hotels and all that stuff in advance. So, not everybody had the cash. And so, there are people that just said, “Look, we’re going to show up. This is just too important. And we’re not going to let this notion of a tax keep us out.” So, there were payers, crashers, but the place was pretty packed.

05-02:51:18

Mair: And our table—because we had paid our fees and reservations, so we had our table. And since we were one of the earlier organizations and groups, we were pretty much dead center, up front, right in front of the dais, which was on a little raised stage.

And there was West Harlem Environmental [Action, Inc. (WE ACT for Environmental Justice)], folks from SOC [Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice], Ford Foundation, Vernice Miller-Travis, Dr. Robert Bullard—who was sort of like an emcee facilitator—and a couple of other folks that were there.

And it's important to note that it was predominantly African-American up on the stage. So, here was the [second National] People of Color [Environmental Leadership] Summit [in 2002]. And I understand, because there was huge tension, because given the first incident with North Carolina and the churches,

a lot of the Black movement was really carrying a lot of the weight and that drew heavily on the civil rights.

There was an unsaid conversation about, “Really, what is this movement?” So there was a subtext playing out that wasn’t fully articulated. In the audience you had Hispanic, Native American, whites, but a large contingent of African-Americans. But a very diverse floor. So, you had this dais talking out to—

05-02:52:38

Eardley-Pryor: The mostly-Black dais and a multitude of people on the floor.

05-02:52:42

Mair: Right. So, the optics of it really was kind of awkward. And, the funding was Greenpeace, Sierra Club, Ford Foundation and a few other big foundations, I think NRDC, a lot of the main organizations. And they were giving their various talks, and they were working through their agenda.

05-02:53:09

Eardley-Pryor: So those organizations were also there?

05-02:53:11

Mair: Yeah. And Sierra Club was—and so, even grassroots mainstream organizations. And this time the Sierra Club showed up. So, the Sierra Club sent its national president—not national president, its Executive Director, Carl Pope, Carl Pope with some of his senior top staff: Bob Bingaman, some lead volunteers, Kirstin Replogle, oh, goodness. I’m looking at her right now. Her name will come to me. Kirstin Replogle, Phaedra Pezzullo—forgive me. Oh, goodness—Kim DeFeo, because Kim DeFeo was the committee head, very great personality. I miss Kim. But, a good contingent—Price, Bill Price was there.

05-02:54:14

Eardley-Pryor: And these are all people representing the Club?

05-02:54:16

Mair: These were [Sierra Club] people, staff and volunteers. So their [Environmental Justice] Committee, as well as staff. Some of the staff that they hired involved Norma Ramos, who was one of the staff hires.

05-02:54:27

Eardley-Pryor: And you’re there representing both the Club, but also especially, I would think, Arbor Hill [Environmental Justice Corporation].

05-02:54:31

Mair: Well, two things. I was there, paid and representative as Arbor Hill [Environmental Justice Corporation]. But since I was also on the national Committee for Environmental Justice—

05-02:54:44

Eardley-Pryor: For the Club, for Sierra Club?

05-02:54:44

Mair:

For the Club, for the Sierra Club, with fidelity—in fact, when I saw Kirstin [Replogle] and them, I said, “Where are you guys sitting?” I saw Bob [Bingaman], and I said, “Where are you guys?” Because they were like wallflowers up against the wall. And there was one of the conversations that really turned south was how [environmental justice] groups were still being treated by mainstream environmental organizations. And at that time, everybody was rushing in because, with environmental justice still being somewhat new, funding was coming at it from academic institutions and foundations.

And so, a lot of whites from universities were going in and writing their grants because they could write. And they’d get funded. And, instead of really being of use to the community, action was basically using the community to get a grant. And they’d get the degree. They get the resources. They get the tools. And the community gets something that may even be useless. So, communities were basically still dealing with just even the gaming of the system that still put them at a disadvantage.

05-02:55:53

Mair:

And there was a lot of venting about that. And, up in that conversation came the fact that, well, how does Sierra Club have an environmental justice program that isn’t run by us? And so, that’s where a lot of that turned on the Sierra Club. And so, you had white staff there, and so folks were challenging, saying, “Who are you? How can you call—you’re not environmental justice. This means something.”

And to this day, and I actually agree and feel this as well. Don’t ever put a title on that’s not you, because the environmental justice movement from day one said, “This is sacred. This is sovereign. This is us. This is our experience.” Unless you’re from an EJ [environmental justice] community, you can’t call your program environmental justice. And even universities, you can’t call—you are not—okay? So, you understand it. But you also intellectually, academically, say, “Listen, you’ve got to relax that because you can’t—you’re trying to patent something that really you can constrain yourself and actually do yourself some harm.”

So, there was that discussion that was happening over what is and what isn’t EJ [environmental justice], which is a fair discussion. There was a conversation happening over organizations appropriating EJ [environmental justice] for their advantage, which was a very powerful and fair discussion. What was unfair was, for some reason, the whipping boy for that entire conversation became the Sierra Club.

05-02:57:43

Eardley-Pryor:

Why, because they were in the room?

05-02:57:45

Mair:

Well, they weren't the only ones in the room, because I remember people from Greenpeace being there, who were one of the founders of [the second National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit], because they were up on the wall.

I'm not sure what or why, but the point of the matter is—I think it might have been because of John McCown out there. Because John went to a lot of meetings, and John was getting hell like that at all the other—every time I saw John at a national meeting or in-gathering of EJ [environmental justice] folks, John was [getting asked], “Dude, what are you doing? What are you doing for us? How are you contributing?”

And John had to work through the Sierra Club way of financing and getting and funding and raising things, which people did not understand. I understood because staff, you have your program budget, and you have your allocations, and there's a way that you finance things. And, he did not have a lot of money to grant out. And, he probably didn't have the authority to be really of useful help and service to these entities, nor did he program or articulate back to national Sierra Club saying, “Hey, if we're going to do this, this is how we're going to need to do this. And we need to do this right.”

05-02:58:56

Mair:

So, what happened was, what John was doing was like I called the old street hustle, which means that—not really hustle, but street negotiating. It's a street negotiating tactic. So, what you do, you go over to somebody, you buttonhole them and say, “Listen,” you horse trade, “look, I can get you this, this, this and this. And then next time around, we'll reach back and give you that.” And then you go over to another actor and say, “Well, okay, I've got so-and-so. I'm going to take care of him or her first, but then I'll get back to you.”

And so, he was trying to negotiate it that way, and people weren't having that. They were like, look, if you're the Sierra Club, this is what we need you to do. But John was not articulating what is the structure of the Sierra Club and how the Sierra Club operates. To them, they saw Sierra Club always the way I saw Sierra Club on day one. Remember when I did not know the nuances and limitations of the Sierra Club? Nor did I know the stress of the groups within chapters, and what limited resources they have, and how they're scrapping for.

05-02:59:58

Mair:

What John did not tell them is that, “Look, the Sierra Club has its own internal entities just like you folks fighting for resources and fighting for dollars.” And so, he couldn't make that. He could not go to poor folks and Blacks and Hispanics and Native Americans in need to say, “I'm here to help you, but wait a minute. These folks come first, if I can, even though they've got funding.” It's just one of those no-win situations. But what John just did not have, the skill, is translating the issue of if you're going to be a bridge, what's the bulkheads holding you up before you lay that decking down?

So, John was that bridge that had no bulkheads. He tried to lay down decking. And that's no different than standing on the shore and chucking wood into the water, watching it float downstream. It's not pretty. It's a waste of resources and time.

05-03:00:50

Eardley-Pryor: So, how did it play out in this [second National People of Color Environmental Leadership] Summit then?

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Mair: So, at the Summit, what ended up happening was, when the real acrimony heated up, I started calling people out, because I started telling the truth. I said, "Look here, that's not—I'm in the Sierra Club, so does that make me an asshole? Does that make me this?" I said, "Y'all know me. And here's what we're trying to do. Here's what the committee"—and they go, "How can you do this?" And I go, "Look, don't even come to me about how. Listen, if you're going to ask me how could the Sierra Club help Memphis, or how can the Sierra Club help Kenner, Louisiana, let's talk about how we do that. But if you're out here just"—I used a lot of expletives.

05-03:01:34

Eardley-Pryor: Arnold coming back?

05-03:01:35

Mair: Arnold came out. Arnold came out. If you're going to come at me—unlike John McCown who would get silent and skulk away—now they've got somebody who's a counterpuncher.

And when you say who am I, I go, "I'm the guy who shut down an incinerator. I'm the guy who sued the state of New York. Or, better yet, did I tell you the state of New York was my boss? Did I tell you that the governor was my boss?" Oh, it gets even better. I tell everybody, "Did I tell you that the commissioner of the agency, the commissioner of the Department of Health, was my boss, so not only did I risk my job, I risked my family's health? And how blankety-blank-blank you dare come to me and talk to me about what I did or didn't do! So, you need to step off. If you're going to come to me, you'd better know what the blankety-blank-blank you're talking about!"

And, naturally, I wasn't using blankety-blank. There was a lot of flimmity-flarm flying. But the point of the matter is that nobody's going to yell louder than me. And my voice went into the high, heavy, drill sergeant mode. So, as they're popping it, I'm popping it back.

And I just told Maria, I says, "Look." I turned to her. I said, "Can you believe this is—? Look, remember what you did at the PCB?" I says, "Can you just like"—

05-03:02:56

Eardley-Pryor: The PCB hearing in the New York Assembly?

05-03:02:59

Mair: No, up in Saratoga, the PCB hearing in Saratoga [near the Fort Edward area]. I says, “Honey, can you do it here?” She just turned and just went right into, again, “Who are you people? This is supposed to be a People of Color Summit. How can you claim that this is a People of Color Summit? Look at this board. Okay, there’s women up there, but where’s the Hispanic women? There’s women up there—”

05-03:03:21

Eardley-Pryor: And she was doing this all in Spanish?

05-03:03:22

Mair: And this is all in Spanish. And she said, “There’s women up there, but where’s the indigenous women? Look at this audience. How are you sitting up there talking down to us? Who elected you chairman? Did we have a vote? When was this dais?” And she goes, “Just because you’ve got money or you funded this doesn’t mean you get to talk to us and treat us,” and she was doing this all in Spanish.

So, all the Hispanics who didn’t understand English, they started standing up and screaming and applauding, because she now was saying—they’re like, “We’re here. We’re lost. We don’t understand what’s going on.” So, all of a sudden this Latina comes up, this Colombiana, and so she just went full Colombian on them. And she just went far.

So, what happened was they immediately did her an intervention. Because Norma Ramos, I think, Norma Ramos who’s also an EJ [environmental justice] activist, told Peggy and Vernice, she says, “Look.”

05-03:04:22

Eardley-Pryor: Who are these people? Who’s “they” that did the intervention?

05-03:04:24

Mair: Norma Ramos was the Sierra Club staffer, who is a paid Sierra Club staffer, but who also comes from one of the few EJ [environmental justice] community activist hires that the Sierra Club did. And I think she was hired that year. So, she was not on there for five years or whatever, three years or what have you. She was hot in her seat. So she was community. And she had a longtime relationship—because she knew Peggy Shepard, who was one of the founders of WE ACT and New York City Environmental Justice Alliance.

Vernice Miller-Travers was one of the founders of New York City Environmental Justice Alliance, but also at that time was a grant officer for the Ford Foundation and one of the major financers of the event that day. And, she just told them, “Listen, folks don’t understand. There’s a lot of Spanish people.” And that’s what Norma was saying. So they went out, and they did an intervention.

So, that intervention essentially was getting translation equipment in. And so, we had to pause for a few hours while they got that translation equipment in and then, A, figured out what languages people needed for it so that people could translate and these people could understand the proceedings and what was going on.

05-03:05:38

Eardley-Pryor: How did that change the dynamic of the Summit?

05-03:05:39

Mair: Well, it changed the dynamics in a couple of ways. Because the next thing that happened—because as she was yelling and I was yelling, I saw Bob and them [from the Sierra Club] over there, and I talked to them. I said, “You get over here.”

05-03:05:50

Eardley-Pryor: Bob Bullard?

05-03:05:51

Mair: No, Bob Bingaman—Robert Bingaman [Sierra Club National Organizing Director]—and Carl Pope [Sierra Club Executive Director]. And I told them, “Come here and sit down.” And while they were doing that intervention of getting these gadgets for translation, I also did the next intervention. This is where the strong bulkheads is. Now I’m going to lay down some planking.

And the planking that I laid down was demanding that the members and the staff, the executive director of the Sierra Club, sit down in the middle of this room of Sierra Club activists at the table of the environmental justice activists. So, in other words, what I’m saying is that, “Here is a planking and a point of respect.” By laying that out and saying—

05-03:06:33

Eardley-Pryor: So, you said, “Come join me at the table.”

05-03:06:34

Mair: “Come join me at my table. I’m not going to a Sierra Club—there’s no such thing as a Sierra Club [table]. But here is the Arbor Hill Environmental Justice table you will come and sit at.” And they were like, “No, no.” I go, “Sit down.” It was not an ask. It was one of those commanding barks. I told Bob, I said, “No, y’all sit down. Do not move. Do not move. This is my table. If somebody’s got something”—and I said to them, “If somebody’s got something to come say, come say it to me.”

And so, only a person of color, only an EJ [environmental justice] had the authentic voice to make that call and that demand. And, that had the net effect of pushing back at a lot of folks to check what their arguments were about.

And then, some of them were hitting at John McCown. I go, “Listen, I know John McCown, but I’m not John.” I said, “I’m not John. I don’t work for John.

I can buy John and mark him down for discount and put him on sale and make him work for you. But I'm not John. This is Arbor Hill Environmental Justice. And they [the Sierra Club people] are here as our guests. They're a guest at my table. And you will not disrespect my guests. If you've got something to say against Sierra Club, you're now speaking against Arbor Hill Environmental Justice."

And then the Latinos jumped up and started applauding because Maria was there, because she already got—so, all of a sudden, you start to see a break in the number of the ranks and a little bit of a solidarity at that moment. So, the conversation picked up a little bit more.

05-03:08:27

Mair:

And I said, "Rhetorically, how are you going to call out the Sierra Club when Greenpeace hires Damu Smith? So why is Damu Smith treated different than John McCown, to be quite frank with you?" I said, "Truth being told, Damu is very respected. He's been doing a lot of stuff." I said, "I'm not discounting that."

Now, what Damu did differently than John McCown was Damu really wedded that Greenpeace program within the community. Damu was in the field with the community. Damu was down there in Kenner. So, whereas John McCown was what I call being a Sierra Club organizer, meaning hanging more with white folks, Damu was, again, just hired by Greenpeace. His focus was immediately from that community. And Damu was right there in bringing resources and bringing their grant resources directly to that community. But, the critique of Sierra Club, as different from Greenpeace, beyond Damu that was all that Greenpeace was doing. Sierra Club was actually doing more.

05-03:09:26

Eardley-Pryor:

With just different means?

05-03:09:28

Mair:

Which is an amazing thing, because—granted, they sent a white organizer up to Peekskill to help create Citizens for Equal Environmental Protection, because this is happening right about that time—because we were getting organizers. They were finally deploying staff to help EJ [environmental justice], because John called me up and says, "Aaron, I need your help. Is there communities that need help with organizers?" I go, "Yeah, I got one—Peekskill. They need an organizer. They're trying to put a sewage treatment line up through there."

So, I was able to point to things that they were doing. But it took John finally realizing that he needed to get people deployed. Now, granted, when he was deploying people, it's like, "Dude, you're killing me." I says, "Why don't you ask me can you hire somebody? I could get you somebody." He goes, "Oh, no, but they already hired the staff already. I've got to find"—I go, "Oh, man, brother, you can't do it that way."

And [that] was a little bit of the difference with the Greenpeace in that Sierra Club would mainly hire from its—put it like this: We talk about pipelines, and this is the staffing pipeline. How do you become a staffer? People come as interns from their colleges. They go through the Sierra Club youth programs. They go through the Sprog [Sierra Club Summer Program], Sierra Student Coalition, so they actually form a circle. And they come in to become staff or leaders or volunteers. So, that's a very healthy way for the organization.

05-03:10:52

Mair:

But if your Sprogs [Sierra Club Summer Programs] and your Sierra Club Student Coalition is relying mainly upon white folks, then your pipeline is not going to produce a diverse pipeline. So what happens when they're starting to hire staff and giving people the first bite of the apple that's coming from that pipeline, they're not touching the historically Black colleges. They're not touching the other real—so, the mistakes at that time were things that—it's not until later that you have a Diversity Committee and all these other trainees and policies later on that would create and correct and remediate those deficiencies. But at that time it was bleeding-edge. Nobody knew how to do it right. But, if you were entrepreneurial enough, you could figure out how to get to the next stage.

05-03:11:40

Eardley-Pryor:

What came out of the 2002 [second National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit] conference? Did this role where you kind of helped make a bridge—

05-03:11:45

Mair:

A couple of things came out of it, because they didn't have another one since. And, what was powerful about it was that I think there was a said—it wasn't said, because I don't think the people were consciously articulating and verbalizing it. But, the fact that there was not another People of Color Summit after that tells you the implicit upshot that people, when they got there, realized, "Well, people of color came together." They were much more aware, much more alert, much more empowered about their power.

And they realized that what was being called for by some was not an inclusive movement, and that people may have needed to yell whatever they're trying to yell before they came together calling it "People of Color." So, I would argue that what folks really—and again, this is my observation—that the "within" group, that the African-American community, really want to push for a stronger say. And I think that that eventually came out of the National Black Environmental Justice—because right after that we formed something called the National Black Environmental Justice Network.

And I think that that was the—once that space was created, a lot of those meetings that were then held throughout the South, which I attended most of them, end up supplanting the need to call together the bigger coalition. In other words, what was playing out on that stage was really what they really

wanted. Basically, they said, “Look, we’re tired of creating movements and other people usurping them, and then we get nothing out of it. We want to really try to make progress.”

05-03:13:33

Eardley-Pryor: And the way that that happened was by focusing on the Black organizations in the South?

05-03:13:37

Mair: Well, the way that happened was by the organizations pushing and building networks that were going to basically bring funding and resources to their campaigns, but also, the academic institutions, the networks. What they were realizing is that, if rushing [head]-long into the mainstream environmental movements and trying to connect with them and not really having things together, you would basically wash away.

05-03:14:07

Eardley-Pryor: They’d get co-opted?

05-03:14:07

Mair: Exactly. The power of co-optation was real. It was happening. Groups were being picked off. People were being picked off. And, I would say the concern over co-optation, and the real threat and the risk of co-optation, was one of the things that really came out of [the second National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit].

But, the action items that moved—a number of things came, there were a number of powerful action items—where a lot of the international work that eventually bloomed out of that, where we started getting early-on—because in my opinion it was the environmental justice movement that got early-on into the climate work, before white NGOs did.

05-03:14:51

Eardley-Pryor: I was thinking 2002 was also when Johannesburg, the UN Summit’s happening. [Eardley-Pryor meant the United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), held in Johannesburg (Jo-burg), South Africa from August 26 to September 4, 2002.]

05-03:14:54

Mair: Yes. From that delegation, from there we sent delegations to Jo-burg.

05-03:15:00

Eardley-Pryor: When you say “we,” do you mean Sierra Club or Arbor Hill [Environmental Justice Corp.]?

05-03:15:02

Mair: Arbor Hill [Environmental Justice Corp]. Maria was my representative with the delegation. We set about a delegation of six people to Jo-burg from Arbor Hill.

West Harlem [Environmental Action, Inc. (WE ACT for Environmental Justice)]—all these groups sent [delegations to] the World Congress Against Racism [the 2001 World Conference against Racism (WCAR) held in Durban, South Africa, under UN auspices, from August 31 to September 8, 2001]. So, all these things were happening.

And so what came out of it, there was a lot of pivotal work to internationalize our work. Because we realized that with the garbage barges, that they're no longer dumping their toxics in just Black communities, but they're dumping them on Black and brown nations. So, we wanted to build solidarity there.

We also wanted to have another pathway to leverage grievance, meaning that if the EJ [environmental justice] work was being undermined by the Republicans, can we work with sovereign nations like the indigenous tribes that had national status at the UN to file human rights [claims.] So the tactics were now going international to go after environmental racism. So, the sophistication of the movement into a [global] North-South movement was really strengthening.

05-03:16:02

Mair:

So, there's a number of positive things that came out of it. But the international work and the World Conference Against Racism—in fact, a lot of the early battles against the water barons, the bottling companies that were basically buying up aquifers, all that began with the Southern Caucus, the Southern Caucus of NGOs [for Sustainable Development], which is basically NGOs from basically Third-World nations, a lot of them Central and South America.

And so what that did, with our diversity—because we already had bilingual staff and volunteers and activists and families—we leveraged that in putting together delegations. And so, we had a delegation and partnership with Panama. Arbor Hill networked with Panama, and we worked with Medgar Evers College. So we were doing a lot of international work. We were holding PrepComs [Preparatory Committees] at the UN. I got credentialed, Arbor Hill Environmental Justice got credentialed at the UN. So these were very, very powerful moments at that international level.

05-03:17:05

Mair:

But the other thing about the UN piece that was also important for me—because about that time my marriage was failing. And, the movement really had started to really take big tolls. That movement—the incinerator fight, all the things in trying to save the community—it was taking me away from my family.

And, let me be specific because, while I was able to successfully bring my daughters in through the recreation programs and pouring all my time into the recreation and being everybody's dad, and able to take my daughters into

some of the activist work and the fishing and the PCB work and getting the students there, I just did not pay attention to how much time I was giving my wife. And from that, I was just taking for granted that she was there. And I was violating one of the most fundamental EJ [environmental justice] principles of asking her permission, asking her, “Is this where you’re happy?” And asking her, rather than just—I became like the things I was fighting against. I was taking but not nourishing and not supplying that place and space.

05-03:18:28

Mair:

So one of the casualties of a lot of that activism—and I wasn’t burning the candle at both ends. I literally threw the whole candle into the pit. And so, one of the immediate casualties of that, like I said, my wife came to the realization that what she had hoped to, by that juncture and this time, that any middle class suburban family would get to a point where you’re making these vacations. You’re making the family time. You don’t have other people in a thousand crisis calls coming in, people calling twenty-four hours a day. That’s on the movement.

But even in the community, when you’re the coach for the kids and you’re accommodating, then you’ve got all the children who are starving, or a child is being beaten up by his mom or dad or his mother’s boyfriend, or some woman is being battered, and they call you up and they show up at your door.

05-03:19:32

Eardley-Pryor:

And these were the things that were happening to you?

05-03:19:33

Mair:

When you’re like the mayor of Arbor Hill, I became the mayor not only of Arbor Hill, but that immediate community. All those issues show up on your door.

But I also told you that we took back that territory from drug lords, and so there was an active, credible death threat put on me. I got a License to Carry permit. Kids thought I was a cop. They called me Five-O, because you would see my little, every now and then, my little holster.

But, it was a myth that was created which I let stay because it actually had a protective layer. Because if people thought—drug lords or anybody—thought that I was a cop, then they would think serious about engaging, and they just did not want bigger cop heat. So, it was kind of funny because sometimes when I would walk down to the Field of Dreams office or walk over to 200 Henry Johnson Boulevard, to the Arbor Hill office, somebody would yell, “Five-O,” because they were dealing something or doing something. And so, automatically I became—which is cool. It had a protective veneer. And I never challenged it.

05-03:20:50

Mair:

But the real risk and the real fear, my wife had to—she was the one that had to deal with that. And she had to worry about not only me [but] the three daughters. And I was kind of reckless. I was a pirate. I tossed my whole self into the movement. And, as they say, somebody has to worry about the clown. And so, she would just worry about somebody shooting me or somebody bashing me in the head or something happening.

And when you step out and you're in that—whether locally or at some national stage, when she was down there and saying, “Oh my God, this is what he's doing. He's doing this even, not in Arbor Hill. He's doing this.” So, you can see the toll that that takes. And people have to assess that. And you've got to respect that. So, she and I are the best of friends. We are both doting grandparents.

But, I thought that through a lot of engagement or making her busy would be a cure, but it was not. Making a family member or spouse busy in your movement, it's still you. It's not her. It's not what she asked for. And I made the mistake and assumption that I rail against other folks, whether it's folks of privilege taking advantage of people of color, you just can't assume another person's space and role. You cannot take other people's place in space. You have to ask.

05-03:22:31

Eardley-Pryor:

When did y'all separate?

05-03:22:32

Mair:

Things first started going south, I would say, about 2004. As they say, it was gone long before then. But when she just basically said, “I'm out, and I can't do it anymore”—

05-03:22:54

Eardley-Pryor:

How did that play out for your daughters, you and your daughters?

05-03:22:57

Mair:

It was tough. It was tough. My daughters were, at that time, the oldest one was in college. And the second one was about to enter—well, the oldest one was at West Point, and the second one was about to enter West Point. The third one was home. And so, we left it up to them where they want to stay. We did not get into the issue of forcing them to make choices. They were young adults, and we left it up to them.

05-03:23:20

Eardley-Pryor:

Did you stay living in the neighborhood?

05-03:23:23

Mair:

No. Two things happened, because right about that time, the embezzlement scandal hit Arbor Hill. This is my two staff, Rodney and them, when they were—

05-03:23:37

Eardley-Pryor: What's the story on that?

05-03:23:39

Mair: The story was this. In short, as a volunteer—because I'm doing a lot of my Sierra Club and national stuff, because I'm just a volunteer. And when I created a not-for-profit, I hired about fifteen staff. I was one of the largest employers within the community. So, creating jobs.

05-03:23:59

Eardley-Pryor: For Arbor Hill EJ [Environmental Justice]?

05-03:23:59

Mair: For Arbor Hill EJ [Environmental Justice] and W. Haywood Burns Environmental Education Center. So with that, you hire an executive director, treasurer, and all these other folks. These are the people who run the day-to-day operations. These are the people who can sign the money and the checks and whatnot and pay the bills and keep the lights on and keep the payroll and everything else going. Running any corporation requires you to trust your employees.

And any organization is vulnerable to, if you hire the wrong person, you can have trouble. Normally, a lot of folks, when you hire within the Black community, you'll find that a lot of the men have records. They have a past. And I totally believed in complete recycling. I totally believed in rehabilitation. I figured that if I paid a very generous, market-rate salary, that'd mean that a person, if they're lucky to come work for us, would be earning anywhere from ten to fifteen thousand dollars more a year than if they worked at any other outfit. Even if working for the city, we paid them more than the city.

So, they were getting very generous salaries. So, I figured that these things, and treating them with the respect that I would want, that would be a deterrent against any fraud, abuse, or negligence with regards to the operation of the organization. And unfortunately, that wasn't the case. So, one fellow, I guess he had a couple of kids in college.

05-03:25:40

Eardley-Pryor: Who?

05-03:25:41

Mair: Nate, Nate Davis. He had a couple of kids in college. He had to pay tuition. He had a mortgage. So, he actually got overextended. And so, it started him—he started taking \$5,000 at a time, and they got up—basically, \$10,000 and banks would have to call and send a notice. So, he did it enough whereby he would avoid triggering any notices. And because we were doing so many projects and we had different grants and stuff coming in at any given time, he was able to cook the books when he had to do the Board presentations.

And so, it's one of those things you can only do it for so long, because our organization was not too lean, but lean enough so—a very lean organization would have caught it right away, because you would have a shortfall. But we had enough reserves and other things where they can hide it. It would take you about two years, which is what it did.

So, in the second year of really bad fraud, we were able to catch it because an audit came due, and it wasn't being done. And so, I had to go to Mr. Davis, who was our—Rodney, because both were Davises, but they were not family. So, I said, "Hey, Rodney."

05-03:27:07

Eardley-Pryor: Who's Rodney?

05-03:27:08

Mair: Rodney Davis was the executive director of Arbor Hill Environmental Justice, and Nate was the director of W. Haywood Burns.

05-03:27:17

Eardley-Pryor: Were they both involved in embezzlement?

05-03:27:19

Mair: Yeah. So, Rodney was the one who always arranged for the auditors in both organizations, even though they had the signatures of each manager. But there was one [auditor] that did a lot of the full-on forensic work. So all of a sudden, he became ill, and he [Rodney] wasn't showing up to work, which was the big telltale symptom.

And then, I called him up and said, "Hey, dude, we've got to get this stuff done." And he was saying he was having mental issues. I said, "Say what?" It's serious, but he's talking about job-related stress. And I said, "Well, we've got to get these audits done. We've got to move this stuff along." And, he said, "Well, contact Nate." And Nate was like, "No, I don't know how to do all that stuff."

And so, in short, I contacted a couple of staff. I pulled the staff together and said, "Look, see what y'all can do to pull together this stuff. We can get these things together for an accountant and start to pull this stuff together." I said, "Now, we'll just have to hire somebody to come in and do the bookkeeping work."

05-03:28:38

Mair: So, in the process of the staff there that we had pulling together a lot of the receipts, first and foremost, when they were looking for the receipts and what have you, they were getting pushback from Rodney. And then Rodney claiming that he's sick, but he did not want to tell them where things were and what have you. And so, I got a call from the staff. They told me what's going on, and I said, "Okay, this is not good." I said, "It's one thing to say that

you're ill, but you can't tell me that you can't help people get the book. They're going to do the work. You ain't got to do it."

What ended up happening was one of the staff who was pretty savvy about putting together spreadsheets and what have you, he got a hold—we had our QuickBooks and also some sheets that he was doing and some rudimentary calculations. And so, he was going through the bank deposits and all the other things and the withdrawals and everything. And so, he noticed a pattern of blocks of money going out and blocks of money going for cash.

05-03:29:42

Mair:

In short, what we discovered was that there was a pattern of theft, that they were taking money out, and at different banks, and they were literally doing it within the span of one week. It was about \$30,000 in one week where they literally went from bank to bank to bank, but one way you break up, if you did a \$30,000 or a \$10,000 withdrawal at one bank, it would trigger. So, you do five [thousand] here, five here, five here. And so, we actually had the pattern.

And when that was brought to my attention, I called the District [Attorney of Albany County, NY]. Two things—I immediately called the district attorney and said, "Look, I've got a problem," and asked his advice on how to proceed. He pointed me to a person, and I called in the organization called the Council of Community Services. They had a forensic accountant, and they had an attorney who we then hired to represent us, to seize the books, take the books and do a forensic accounting. So, after they did the forensic accounting they discovered over \$200,000, conservatively, stolen. And, they literally had it by who went to what bank and to where, and they broke down who, what, when. It was bad. It was bad.

05-03:31:01

Eardley-Pryor:

With both these Mr. Davises, what ended up happening with them?

05-03:31:06

Mair:

They were eventually prosecuted. And they served time. And, let's see. Nate, I believe, is living in Texas somewhere now. You can steal up to six million dollars from an organization, and all you're going to get is about five years. And then, what happens, Nate, he was a model prisoner, so he served about two years and got probation. And they got to pay restitution, and every now and then a check would come in or whatever have you until they stopped coming.

05-03:31:36

Eardley-Pryor:

What happened to Arbor Hill Environmental Justice Corporation?

05-03:31:40

Mair:

Well, two things. In the wake of that, you've got to spend now almost two years, three years, cleaning up a mess. Because now, once you find out what they stole, then you've got to find out what wasn't paid. And then it's cleaning that up. And so, at that time we had our environmental education center up in

Troy. That's where W. Haywood Burns, which was doing a lot of our international work, so a lot of more—

05-03:32:08

Eardley-Pryor: You had moved that from 200 Johnson up to—

05-03:32:10

Mair: Right, because it was really picking up. This is that whole—

05-03:32:14

Eardley-Pryor: You moved it up to Troy, [New York]?

05-03:32:14

Mair: Yeah, moved it up to Troy. And the reason why that was important. Because that building had riparian rights until the middle of the Hudson, and it gave us standing in the battle for the Hudson River. So, that was a very critical strategic environmental—

05-03:32:27

Eardley-Pryor: So, the Haywood Burns [Environmental Education] Center being on the Hudson, you could then sue on behalf of the organization?

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Mair: Exactly.

05-03:32:34

Eardley-Pryor: With standing.

05-03:32:34

Mair: With standing, which is really huge.

05-03:32:36

Eardley-Pryor: Did that play a role in the PCB fight then?

05-03:32:40

Mair: It played a significant role because, again, we had an interest in cleaning up because now our property was being covered with PCBs. So, no, we had a very, very big role.

But we had to now liquidate to pay cash and to settle, because what happened, one of the things they didn't pay was payroll taxes. That was one of the things we found. So, we had to pay a small fortune in payroll taxes. They also had all these leases on things like Xerox machines and other things that they had defaulted on, but they hid the records from us. And so, there was all these collection notices. So, there were actually judgments and liens that we found that were out there that we had to go out and pay. So, it was a mess.

05-03:33:30

Mair: For example, I can give you an example of one funny thing. It's a Xerox machine. Had you paid the lease, you would have, at tops, maybe over the life of the lease, maybe ten to fifteen grand for the Xerox machine. But because

they defaulted on this thing, you had to pay—it was like fifty grand. All of a sudden you have this thing, and you have to pay fifty grand for a Xerox.

05-03:33:53

Eardley-Pryor: For a copy machine?

05-03:33:53

Mair: For a copy machine. And it was a big deal because we were cranking out stuff left and right. What we were paying at Kinko's [now FedEx Office] and all the other places was exponential. So when you had your own machines, it was reduced. But you had to pay the bills. It's easy. You just pay this versus paying that. But when you don't pay that—

05-03:34:14

Eardley-Pryor: So, did both Haywood Burns [Environmental Education Center] and the Arbor Hill EJ [Environmental Justice], did they both collapse in the wake of having to make these payments?

05-03:34:20

Mair: Yeah. Well, one was in more debt than the other. One was more damaged than the other. So, what happened was that you had to liquidate the assets on the Arbor Hill side to cover the damage, the real heavy damage, on the W. Haywood Burns side.

So, I had to go through the painful process of winding down, firing staff, laying off staff. So, there were a lot of people, a lot of families who were hurt. People who, in theory, should have been—the company should be running strong right now. But, you had to lay people off, and you had to let them go.

05-03:35:07

Eardley-Pryor: You've put your life into building this organization, into the work that—

05-03:35:13

Mair: And then I had to put it in the grave.

05-03:35:15

Eardley-Pryor: And in the meantime, it's also the same time where your marriage is collapsing.

05-03:35:19

Mair: Oh, yeah. Well, this is that added stress, because now it's hitting the paper. And one of the first calls I got was from Ward Stone, one of the first calls I got. And he just said to me, "Tell me what you need." He goes, "Just tell me what you need," because he knew I was fit to be tied. But, a lot of people came through—Roger Gray, a lot of the allies who were there from the beginning—they really surrounded me and really just did what they did as volunteers. They could do what they did.

In fact, Pete Sheehan, who was [part of the Sierra Club group] Hudson-Mohawk, he was also one of my staff early on at the Haywood Burns

[Environmental Education Center]. He would send his son to go over and cut the grass. His son volunteered to cut the grass for about two or three summers. So, you had that kind of outpouring. You had people who were just helping with a lot of the things to try to help things peter on and at least try to negotiate, because you try to convey to people that this is too important for the community. But, once that happens, we made a lot of enemies.

05-03:36:39

Mair:

When you're an environmental justice organization, you make a lot of enemies. And by that I mean in a good way. These are enemies who are polluters. These are enemies who were city hall, who were really, really damaging people. And they felt that even with that wound, that somehow you would skulk away. And so, even when you show up still at a hearing to defend the community—one of the idiots who was a councilman or whatever, "Well, what did you guys do with your money?" like it's a punch line. And like I said, you don't pause. You just take that and you flip it on its head and you beat them with it. But that's no excuse for, as they say, for them to treat the community continually poorly. But we never backed away.

So, one of the things that you had to do is move from a strong, powerful posture to a much more weak. Instead of being the spirit of the community, you had to be a little bit more of the ghost. So, several things happened. By that time—in fact, just before that happened, the city had moved and voted us out of the Field of Dreams. And so, we had lost. That was a big blow.

And that blow there was essentially, we were successful in saving the Lincoln Park pool. We mobilized and organized and saved the Lincoln Park pool. But in doing that, that hit one of the mayor's special projects because he wanted to give that to the Empire State Games Commission for mainly whites to have Olympic pools by taking away the pool that belonged to the community. So, children in the poor community would no longer have a pool. So, we were able to save that.

05-03:38:17

Mair:

But because we had those seats on the Board [for Field of Dreams]—six seats on the Board were controlled by the city hall, meaning that they had three from city hall, but they also, through patronage, controlled the Housing Authority seats. So, they were able to democratically vote us out. And so, that [recreation programming] eventually wound down, because they actually thought running a youth league with over 1,000 kids was something they could easily do. And I knew that that would implode once they dealt with the weight of it.

05-03:38:48

Eardley-Pryor:

Just, all these things are collapsing around the same time. How were you dealing with that?

05-03:38:55

Mair:

It was tough. It was tough. It was really, really tough because at the same token, a lot of things were still being called on and that. It's one of those things where I think a weaker person would have just totally walked away. I never deserted my post. I never stopped with my work and my commitments.

There was still the commitments we had on the international front. So, a lot of that came out of my own pocket. So, making my travel to work with the communities in Panama and the Southern Caucus [of NGOs for Sustainable Development] relationships that we had opened up. We had the last conference on collaboration at the Empire State Capital. That was one of our last big international conferences.

So, we just wound down those activities. But, what that did was that left high and dry a lot of partners. And so, not only did it impact Arbor Hill [Environmental Justice] particularly, but it impacted a lot of the work globally. And it crippled a lot of the work that we had and were doing and were supporting at the national environmental justice level. So, on that end, you had to ceremoniously wind a lot of those pieces down.

05-03:40:13

Mair:

So, Arbor Hill EJ [Environmental Justice] and W. Haywood Burns [Environmental Education Center] exist as 501(c)(3)s only on paper. But they're right now paper. I don't staff. I don't raise money for them. I could, but the thing is that if I cannot trust who to hire, and if I can't trust people—and this is the thing really, I would say, the trauma is, is that my faith was broken and my ability to recycle—in the critical environmental justice principle of recycling and hiring people within the community and giving it that chance. If I don't believe in that, it's just hard for me to step now into that place and space.

And, the other thing is, I just don't have that space in my heart and my life to give at this moment. So now, I have them, should I need them. Every now and then I do. They're no longer tax-deductible, but they are still entities that I can actually use, and every now and then would need to be, we use them. But, since we have Arbor Hill Development Corporation, I now act through them, and I act through them as a consultant and as an advisor. So, when I need to step into the EJ [environmental justice] space and place, I leverage the Arbor Hill Development Corporation as their advocate.

05-03:41:51

Eardley-Pryor:

And that's with Arlene?

05-03:41:53

Mair:

That's with Arlene Way. So, Arlene is one of the last of the few good folks that are there. So, two things. Arbor Hill still has its lion. But, it no longer has the head. It no longer has the fortress that was once there. And the community has suffered mightily.

The minute that Arbor Hill [Environmental Justice] and W. Haywood Burns [Environmental Education Center] was gone, the community was beset by dark. City hall went after it with a vengeance. Buildings, it went from forty-five percent owner-occupied homeowners to now it's probably at about ten to fifteen percent. It's that bad. The community organization that stood there and fought for the programs—the working class could just at least get the paint for the homes—it's no longer there. So, our organization that defended that place and space for them, that provided that buffer to allow them to be a healthy working class community, that capacity, once you lose that, it's gone.

And then, there's the energy. How do I step and expend my energy? So, I'm at that stage in my life that I decided to say, "Okay, I've done this much investment at this level of the EJ [environmental justice] space. I then decided to flip almost 100 percent of my time now to the Sierra Club space." And so, with that, that's when I started throwing, basically from 2008 to '10 onward, heavily in the Diversity Committee, and then from the Diversity Committee to Diversity Council.

And then, as the EJ [environmental justice] work started winding down because of the lack of funding, and then the coal war came in, and helping them transition to staff, I just really said, "Okay, we're at a logical space within the Sierra Club national to really shape that culture on the Board."

05-03:44:01

Eardley-Pryor: The coal war meaning the [Sierra Club's] Beyond Fossil Fuels campaign, the Beyond Coal campaign?

05-03:44:04

Mair: Yes. So, that was beginning because this was the whole argument now, the push toward clean fuels and climate organizing. So with that transitioning and gearing up, I was now working on the culture by which that would change. And so, the [Sierra Club's national] Diversity Committee became very powerful.

So, Sanjay Ranchod, who was then on the Board of Directors—I think Sanjay might have been—was Sanjay president? I can't remember. Well, Sanjay was the chair of our [Diversity] Committee. So, Sanjay Ranchod, Allison Chin were the two Board co-chairs of that Diversity Committee. And, that allowed me a lot of the space to decompress and really pour into the structural stuff that I wanted to at least see the Club evolve into.

And it is not just me, but Annette Rizzo, who was just a phenomenal staff person—Annette Rizzo, she actually, I believe she started through the EJ [environmental justice] program. She was one of the people from Appalachia through EJ [environmental justice], working on mountaintop removal. People don't realize the coal program actually comes out of the coal effort within the EJ [environmental justice] program, because it was going after mountaintop

removal and how rural Appalachia was being affected. And Annette Rizzo, I believe she began in that space, and she was one of the ones who transitioned over [to the Sierra Club].

05-03:45:28

Mair:

So, her work, and she's just one of the phenomenal—there are people who have very powerful skills. And mine is not the person who sits and is the scribe and who bullet points and writes things up. Annette Rizzo is just one of those people. She'll sit there, "So, okay, Aaron, do your thing." And I'll do my channeling thing, and Annette would just—boom, up comes this beautiful—[I'll say,] "I did all that?" "Yeah, you did." And so, she's that person that converts a lot of the energy of others into those organized documents. And she's got that skill. It's an art form. And you respect it. You totally respect it.

05-03:46:22

Eardley-Pryor:

I want to just question about—all these things. You make this transition after having all these collapses and these devastating effects on both your personal life and this lifetime of work you've put in to something. And you've transitioned it in a positive way towards your Sierra Club national work.

05-03:46:41

Mair:

Right, because two things. The bulkheads stood. They're there. That's that work, that life work. That's there. The bridge-head and work and planking between the movements on the other side, remember, that is also there. What is the paint or the patina on the bridge, which is the organizations that helped you do that stuff, that helped you do that work, that's what's peeled. But the bridge is sound. You're looking at the Brooklyn Bridge. That granite is sound. Those caissons upon which it's set, it's anchored good.

So the work that I did, the authentic work, that doesn't change because of the acts of some individuals, or even the death of people like my brother Damu Smith. There's been countless others. They're people within the movements that pass on. You lose people. So, things happen. There's always that point of transition. The question is, what do you do? What's your next step? What's your next play?

05-03:47:57

Mair:

Well, number one, you take an inventory assessment of what you've done, number one. You always check that compass. You always do that compass check and see where you are. Where's that heart of yours? So, while there's some holes that may be poked in it, the point of the matter is, while I said I'd never take stock of what I've done, I do know what I've done.

And so, the issue now is to walk on that bridge. I've allowed myself to go from that building phase, to now walking on that bridge and now leading others over. So now came the time for me now to walk over to the other side, to lead the Sierra Club and lead the people on the EJ [environmental justice]

side to the movement side. Now, I've entitled myself and allowed myself to now use that structure that I built to build it even stronger, to get to the wisdom of saying this is the place where you need to stop building and invest in it. Now, you need to step in the place of leadership and help now guide a movement.

05-03:49:04

Mair:

And that was the moment in which Mark Walters of the Diversity Committee said, "Look, you should run for the national Board." And I said, "I really don't think I have the energy." And from that, that's from all the holes, the shotgun blast of things that had happened. I said, "I really don't." And I laid it out. I said, "I really don't think"—and Mark says, "Mair, you know better than this. Surround yourself with the right people." He goes, "The movement, you are the right person." Mark, medical student, I think now he's a doctor. He says, "No, you are the right person. You need to do this. I can't. Allison [Chin] can't. Clearly, none of the white folks."

He says, "You need to get on that national Board." He says, "We've done all this work with EJ [environmental justice]. We've done all this work with diversity, Aaron." He says, "This can't be a committee report that lies on the shelf. This can't be another committee that comes up with great recommendations." He said, "You have the fire in you to fight." He says, "You've got to fight this fight. This is where you need to now walk across." So, that was the invitation to for me to go out and throw my hat in the ring, get my stuff out there. And that's what led to, as they say, the national walk.

05-03:50:36

Eardley-Pryor: All right. We'll take a little break here.

05-03:50:38

Mair: Sure.

(break in audio)

05-03:50:40

Eardley-Pryor: All right, Aaron. So, one of the things, before you dive into the Board of Directors in 2011 for the Sierra Club, part of this rebuilding that you're doing and focusing new energy at a national scale, and refocusing yourself—there's also an important piece that you find new love.

05-03:50:58

Mair:

Yeah. Several things happened when I had that whole cycle of traumatic events. It's at that point in time where I had to admit that structurally a lot of the things that I tried to erect in the community of high need, that as those things collapsed, and as those forces like city hall, like staff, those models and those theories did not prove out. They needed that time of what they call self-healing.

So, what I did do is I bought a home on a nature preserve outside the Great Flats [Nature Trail] in Schenectady, just like I intended when I was in Arbor Hill. And I found the perfect little spot. It's a few dozen acres that were nearby, and property adjoined it. So, I was a man in an old kingdom. I had wetlands nearby, ponds. I had the Mohawk River. And, about this time I allowed myself to meet and talk and hang out with people other than Sierra Club.

05-03:52:28

Mair:

And at the time, at the Great Flats [Nature Trail], I still was doing a lot of grassroots local Sierra Club work. We were still taking on the folks in Schenectady County, just like I took them on in Albany and as I took them on the Hudson River. Instead of it being the Hudson, it was the Mohawk River, and parents being concerned about discharge and pollutants and that. So a lot of my Sierra Club work was working with the late Dr. John Van Deloo of the Hudson-Mohawk Committee. And he worked on a lot of wetland restorations. He worked with Pine Bush. He worked with several other activities.

And at that same token, I joined the New York State Pine Bush Preserve Commission. So I began working there, within what they called the Pine Barrens. The Pine Barrens were left behind by the old Great Lake Albany, which was once a massive glacier. It was a glacial lake that was left behind, and it would drain once the dam right around Storm King broke. And it left behind the Pine Barrens and the sand dunes, et cetera. So, I joined that facility. So, I maintained active work as a board member on that organization but also doing a lot of grassroots Sierra Club work in and around the Schenectady area. We got ourselves involved in a couple of good projects.

05-03:53:52

Mair:

But at the same token, I met my wife Elizabeth Floyd. And Elizabeth was back in the United States because her mother had passed, and she was worried about the health of her father. He was at that time William Floyd. My father-in-law was having issues with regards to a cyst on his liver. So, her role in living in the community, she just wanted to be near her dad.

[Brief pause to re-attach a microphone that unclipped]

05-03:54:43

Eardley-Pryor: You said Elizabeth was back in the country again?

05-03:54:46

Mair:

Yes. She was living in Japan for a while. And so, she was there for over a decade and a half. And like I said, her father's in his eighties, and so she decided to come back to the States. But that was the motivation for her being back.

05-03:55:03

Eardley-Pryor: How did y'all meet?

05-03:55:06

Mair:

Good old-fashioned computers. So, here's the funny story. My daughters were upset with me in that they felt that I was getting kind of shabby and feeling too sorry for myself with everything. I was pretty much in a funk but still maintaining activity, but still not the dad that they knew, the peppy, energetic, fire dad. And so, they were convinced I was feeling sorry for myself. And so, there's a show called "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy." And that's where you go and make a guy over. And this was the "metrosexual" thing. In fact, that was the show at the time [aired on the Bravo network, 2003-2007]. It was kind of funny because they decided to get me a makeover and put me back on the market. It's kind of cool when your daughters decide to put you back on the market.

05-03:55:53

Eardley-Pryor:

That's a lot of love.

05-03:55:54

Mair:

Because it's two things. They're also giving me permission. And when you think about things like what would kids think or whatever, when your kids are pushing you, it made it kind of special. So, they took me down. The two oldest were at West Point. And they took me over to the outlets that are right there adjoining, right next to West Point, and proceeded to spend about a couple of grand of my cash on clothes.

So, I had duds and everything else, and they made sure I got a good shave, good haircut, because I was looking like what my daughter called Homey D. Clown [character played by Damon Wayans on "In Living Color" television show, 1990-1991], because my hair was sticking out like this. So, they made sure that I got it to even up, so I kind of looked like what I look now. I kind of liked the goatee look, because I had a big, scruffy beard. And so, it's a look that I kind of kept.

05-03:56:58

Mair:

So they got me back to that stage, and so I said, "What else should I do?" They go, "Look, Dad, this is the way we do it nowadays." And that's where I learned about online dating. You put together a profile. So, my daughters read through it. They told me about it, because I put too much in it about myself. "Dad, that's just too creepy. This is what you need to do." But I told them, I said, "I really want to be verbose because I don't want to put something short and shallow, because I don't have—I'm not a chit-chatter." I said, "If somebody gets through at least one volume of something, then they're worthy to hang out." So, they allowed me that.

And so, I had a lot of very bright individuals, but when you're doing that and trying to get back, you meet a lot of people. It's an interesting scene because you meet a lot of broken-hearted women whose husbands or somebody else cheated them. And so, a lot of the conversations revolved around, "Well, don't

you better!” I go, “Oh my God.” So the minute I cycled through that bunch, I just met somebody who was just cool.

05-03:58:14

Mair:

And one of the things I had is my sixties music and seventies music, and basically being a Black Peekskill-Woodstock hippie-type of funk-fusion, but you’ve got to have a little Motown. And you’ve got to have a little bit of [Bob] Dylan, a lot of Dylan. Sprinkle a lot of Dylan, and a lot of “The Boss” [Bruce Springsteen], too. And so, she thought that I had a cool, quirky personality. And the other thing, I think, that really made her find me interesting, she just saw—she read about my background, because one of the things is I have a massive footprint out there.

So as she’s checking out, reading my profile and all that other stuff, she just Googles. And as you know, if you Google “Aaron Mair,” your computer breaks. And so, she said, “Well, you’re this crazy activist, and you care about the environment.” And, something about being an environmental steward and activist really struck a chord with her. So, while I did not meet her on a Sierra Club outing, I did enough outings between the environmental justice and Sierra Club movement and enough work that actually helped win her heart over and say, “Yeah, I guess I’ll go see this guy.”

05-03:59:35

Mair:

And we dated, and we decided that we’ve got great chemistry. And after a while, what do you want out of this relationship? And she was forward about her trying to have a child, and this was something that was important in her life, and how she tried. In her early marriage in her life, this was not something that her partner wanted, but something that she did. And she’s now at the stage where she’s worrying about not ever having a child. Her mother had passed, and so these were things that were big to her.

And I said, I’m a Third World guy. I’m a Mair. I said, grandson of Zion. Zion had almost, my God, two sets of nine kids. I said, “We can try this.” But my main concern then is, if we did try something like that, my worry was about age and the child having difficulties and being challenged. And I says, “Are you ready for that kind of lifestyle?” And I confessed, I said, “I’m really not.” But I said, “If you are, and if you’re willing to”—I said, “I’m willing to. Let’s meet and discuss it.”

05-04:00:46

Mair:

So, we discussed it. And so, we agreed to do it. We agreed, A, to come together and whatnot. So, I told her, I said, “There’s only two things. You had to meet my family, and if they approve, it’s cool.” And so, it’s kind of funny. Here’s this big, strong guy, and you read this background, and all of a sudden he punks out and says, “I’ve got to get permission from my family.”

05-04:01:08

Eardley-Pryor:

That’s a big, powerful family.

05-04:01:09

Mair: Because my family is very much my life. They're my roots. They're my rock. And, as you know from where I come from, you understand why that is so. So, she met my daughters. My daughters were very taken with her. And, I think she thought that was it. I says, "Oh, no. You've got to come down to the family reunion."

05-04:01:29

Eardley-Pryor: With hundreds of McKenzies and Mairs.

05-04:01:31

Mair: Oh, man. It just totally made her love me even more, because she was really one of those people. She said you could put her family in a Volkswagen Beetle and drive it off the bridge, and it would wipe them all out. And then she comes down there to this massive southern family, and it's almost like this commune atmosphere where the elders are taking care of one another, and this land is still within the family. And they're just beautifully insane. You met my cousin Stella [Hattie Estella Greene]. And, they just totally—my family totally captured her. I think she wanted to—

05-04:02:05

Eardley-Pryor: Your family is amazing.

05-04:02:06

Mair: I think she wanted to marry my family and just I was a bonus. But she really, really—her heart, when she went to Travelers Rest the first time, her heart was just taken. So, the family, she met everybody. She was just herself, and they received her. And so, that was one family, because it took two family reunions. So, they received her. And so, at the next family I had to do a presentation.

05-04:02:44

Eardley-Pryor: Like a family history presentation?

05-04:02:46

Mair: Yeah. I had to do one, because I do it every—it's always an iteration. They're never the same. But there's the core pieces of it that's the same, so that anybody that's new that comes in, they get the Cliffs Notes speedup. But then there's that section of what was the cool thing you found, because you've got to keep it fresh. But still, in the end, in the close, I wanted to give credit. And I was thanking the credits. And so, I gave a little bit of her family of where she came from. And so that was the little add-on, so they knew who she was and her unique family history. In fact, she had an uncle that served in the Massachusetts 54th [an African-American Volunteer Infantry regiment in the US Civil War] that fought down there at Fort Wagner.

05-04:03:28

Eardley-Pryor: One of Elizabeth's family members?

05-04:03:29

Mair: Yes. So, she has an ancestral uncle, Thomas J. Floyd, who fought at Fort Wagner, survived, and a very fascinating history is that she's descended from them. And she goes, "Does that mean I'm an independent Black woman?" She said this. I go, "No, that's a lived experience." I said, "No, sorry. You crossed over a long time ago." So, that was one of those lighthearted moments.

But the family felt that that was also an omen. And so, at the close, I proposed in front of the whole family and totally humiliated her. Everybody gave a standing ovation at this reunion. And she's over there crying and bawling like a fool. And then my baby sister Christine yells out, "Hey, you damn fool. Did she accept? Everybody's up there acting like"—and everybody broke out into laughter. And she's like, "Elizabeth, are you sure you want to do this?" And she's just nodding, and she ran up and gave me a big hug.

05-04:04:25

Eardley-Pryor: In front of everyone?

05-04:04:26

Mair: In front of everyone.

05-04:04:28

Eardley-Pryor: That's a great moment.

05-04:04:29

Mair: It was a real cool ceremony. When we got married, my three oldest daughters were part of her bridesmaids. Her best friend flew in from Japan. She was her matron of honor. And so, it was really cool that my daughters—because when they accepted her, they really are really close with her.

05-04:05:00

Eardley-Pryor: Does that mean a lot to you, I imagine?

05-04:05:01

Mair: It means a lot to the family. You want to do these things right, and again you want to make sure you have the permissions and all the other things, because people have got to own their space. You can't assume that and take it for granted. So, it was a beautiful ceremony. In fact, if you remember my Cousin Golvin's house, in that field, that was where the reception was. We had a massive reception, spilling all the way over to Stella's down to the lake.

05-04:05:26

Eardley-Pryor: Down in Travelers Rest?

05-04:05:27

Mair: Yes, down in Travelers Rest. And we got married at Golden Grove Baptist Church. And, that was one of those times when Pastor Beckett was on fire.

05-04:05:37

Eardley-Pryor: Pastor Beckett can give a sermon.

05-04:05:38

Mair: Pastor Beckett delivered a very good sermon. But also, my daughters, part of their gift, they actually sung songs. Everybody was doing these songs. So it was almost like this musical wedding. So, my brother-in-law, Greg, who I made him one of my groomsmen—because since my daughters were going to [be in Elizabeth's wedding party], her brother and family were going to be groomsmen of mine. And my best friend Stephen Segore was my best man. And, so Greg goes, "Hey, wait a minute. Aaron, you cheated. Aren't we going to sing?" So, they had everybody there doing these songs and these dedications. I said, "Be careful, man. I might make you sing." But anyway, it was great. And, a year after that—

05-04:06:22

Eardley-Pryor: That marriage was in 2006, right?

05-04:06:23

Mair: That is correct. And so, one of the things was that the clock was ticking. So I'm glad that Michelle Obama wrote about her journey and her story and the use of IVF [in vitro fertilization] to have her children [see Michelle Obama's memoir, *Becoming*, published November 13, 2018] because that's what we had to do. Because those injections, when you have to boost the hormones, you have to do that. So when I read that, it was really a big thing for me because most of these things you just don't talk about. And that's a very big thing for career women. A lot of women go through—even activist women in the Sierra Club, they sacrifice a lot and all, plus they've got to do their academic careers, and they struggle to have children. And there is technology there now that is helping women. And so, it's kind of empowering that other women are talking about this. And I think the fact that the First Lady, Michelle Obama, talked about it— [See Michelle Obama's interview with Robin Roberts on ABC's "Good Morning America" a few days before releasing the memoir *Becoming*.]

05-04:07:22

Eardley-Pryor: In her book *Becoming*, most recently. It just came out.

05-04:07:26

Mair: In fact, if Michelle Obama didn't talk about it, I would not have shared that story. But it's important because it's about what women go through. I know that a lot of professional women in the Sierra Club, to find the right person, and plus all the things that they juggle, many of them delay having children. And sometimes you have to use the best technology available. So, this is one of the things. We were blessed to have Olivia Helen Mair. She was born December 27, 2007.

05-04:07:56

Eardley-Pryor: Christmas baby.

05-04:07:57

Mair:

She is a joy in our lives. She is like her sisters, but she's very unique. She loves geology. She hangs out at the Helderberg [Mountains]. Out of all my kids, she has the massive fossil collection and geological collection of fluorescing rocks. She's really interested in hard science. And she loves history. She travels with me to all of the battlefield sites. She is as passionate—I think I did very well in infecting her with the love for the 1st Rhode Island [Continental Army regiment during the American Revolutionary War, known as the "Black Regiment"], because she loves the stories and she loves the fact that we do the stories in the field. Every spring, we spend it in Block Island, Rhode Island. So, she is there in the salt pond and all the little sea critters. And so, she loves the outdoors. And, I take her through the Adirondacks every summer. We've got our hikes. We've got our places and spaces that we go to. She is just a fabulous, fabulous young kid.

So, I think that while she may not be of the military set, but I think she might be a future geologist. The good thing in Joe LeConte, or actually the good thing in John Muir, the geological side—it's really interesting how strong her love of rocks, and just the age of the planet. It just totally trips her out to say the Earth is 4.5 billion years old and really get it. She's just amazed at our planet.

05-04:09:31

Mair:

And she is the apple of our eye. And her sisters are dotting over her in every which [way]. It's kind of funny because sometimes when we're out, they think that she's the daughter of one of my daughters. And they go, "No, that's our sister." But to put it in perspective, I have a nephew who is about a few years older than my baby sister. So, this has happened several times even in my own family where you have a twenty-two or twenty-one-year gap between the oldest—there's nine of us. And between the oldest and youngest is a twenty, twenty-one-year gap. So you have that weirdness. It's not weird, but it happens. But that's not really the issue. The issue is that we have this beautiful child. We are family. And it happened in, as they say, it's happening in this upswing.

So with this, she [Elizabeth] knew what she was marrying. One of the good things I had to tell her, I said, "Being with the Sierra Club is a very important piece of my life. It's a very necessary thing. I love the outdoors. I love the environment. I love the planet. These are the things I've got to do." And the environmental justice movement, here are things that she knew going in. So, this is not a surprise. Unlike Maria who didn't have a choice, who had to grow and go into a movement, Elizabeth walked into this with eyes wide open and knowing that this is a critical part of who I am. And so, it's working. And she's very fascinated with the work that I do.

05-04:11:12

Eardley-Pryor: So, finding this new love and this new life gives you a new lease and a new chapter. It sounds to me like you focused that into this national campaign work.

05-04:11:21

Mair: Well, that's the thing, because at about this time, I'm working heavily, like I said, walking that planking. And that old life, like I said, what was really suffering, because like I said, the foundations of this bridge, this bridge is now built. And the thing that's peeling off is the paint and the patina that I was painting it with and giving it the flourish so that people can see it. But that kind of peeled away, and Elizabeth now is a new coat of paint. So that bridge is still there. That foundation is still there. That connection of history, environment and movement and inclusion is there. And, she gets to see me walk that and teach my daughter symbolically. So, here's another generation of environmental warriors there. And so, I go in, as per my work. It's heavily involved now in a lot of that diversity space and that diversity work.

05-04:12:19

Eardley-Pryor: Can you tell me a little bit—I know you start working, start really investing in this national Diversity Committee work for the [Sierra] Club around 2008, 2009. But that's also the time when Obama was elected. Can you tell me about what that meant for you, and what that experience was like for you?

05-04:12:34

Mair: Well, two things. You have the election, and the campaign. I was afraid. In fact, what's really interesting, because Kirstin Replogle from the EJ [Environmental Justice] Committee, who's also living in Chicago but helping us with a lot of diversity work, so she was around and still commuting—great friend. And she actually contacted me. She says, "You've got to hear this guy, Barack Obama." Kirstin Replogle was the first person to introduce me to Barack Obama, not personally, but—

05-04:13:08

Eardley-Pryor: Who he was, yeah.

05-04:13:08

Mair: Who he was, what's happening. And so I started searching and finding his talks and him speaking. At that time, he was a protégé of Jeremiah Wright. So, I started pulling up Jeremiah Wright's sermons. And Jeremiah Wright is a brilliant, passionate, powerful Christian man. And the speech that was warped to try to defame him [in an ABC News segment in March 2008] was probably one of—if people bothered to listen to the full speech, it's a speech that I would give today. I would give that speech right now.

05-04:13:45

Eardley-Pryor: And you grew up listening to the preachers from the Black pulpit speak on these issues of liberation and power.

05-04:13:51

Mair: Every preacher that I know in my history and my heritage spoke like Jeremiah Wright, in fact, even with more fire. When I say a preacher speaks with fire, you tell the truth. And a lot of people want to say you only can say nice things. And it's really kind of a dishonest argument, especially when bad people who do bad things and then try to wrap themselves in good and say, "You said a bad word."

And our current president [Donald Trump] is a master of that. The hypocrisy in saying you don't love and support the troops, but then he goes over to Europe, and he doesn't even bother to go to the American memorial that was set up by a foreign country to honor Americans. And he blows it off on the same day he's criticizing Barack Obama. He's saying Barack Obama disrespected—but it's a very powerful point. And so, it's that thing that, when I saw Barack, I just knew of the people whose path that he was walking in.

05-04:14:54

Eardley-Pryor: When was that? Clearly, before the election?

05-04:14:56

Mair: This is, I would say—

05-04:15:01

Eardley-Pryor: During the presidential campaign is when you saw him speak?

05-04:15:04

Mair: Well, before that. Kirstin spoke of him before that, and this is the campaign. But before that, you learn about him. You learn about his work. You learn about—I have respected the work of ACORN [Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now], which is another grassroots civil rights organization that I had a lot of respect for. And when this guy [Obama], it turned out, worked for them, I said this is the guy. This is something special.

And then, I got a chance of one of those rare clips that you hear him as, I think, a state senator. I said, "Good God, this guy is onto something." And then I just started to dig into his background. And then I saw that his father was from Africa and his mother was European. And that was where I knew that he had a blindness. And I just said, this guy really gets it. But my only concern, my only worry, is that he may be too willing to compromise.

05-04:16:01

Eardley-Pryor: Do you want to take a break here for just a minute?

05-04:16:02

Mair: Mm-hmm.

05-04:16:03

Eardley-Pryor: Okay.

(break in audio)

05-04:16:04

Eardley-Pryor: Okay, here we go.

05-04:16:06

Mair:

So, one of the important things about Barack when he ran was the use of his name. He did not do what Rafael Cruz did. He did not change his name to Ted [Ted Cruz, US Senator from Texas since 2013]. He did not do what Piyush Jindal did, was add “Bobby” to his name [Bobby Jindal, former Governor of Louisiana from 2008 to 2016]]. To me, when you compromise and you hide your ethnicity, it’s dangerous politics because nobody should ever surrender their name. You run whole.

So, when this man came out as Barack Hussein Obama, I said, “Man, this guy, he has the heart. He has the fire. He’s a genius. But you know something?” I said, “I’m not sure whether America is ready for a man with a name like that,” because, again, the anti-Muslim, even then, hostility and hysteria in America, the culture gap was just the worst. And then, him being Black and calling himself Barack, I said, “What does it mean anyway?” You look it up, and you say, “Blessing?” I go, “No way.” So, I saw the blessing coming. And, I was excited to see that.

And it was also exciting to see that at the time that we’re working for the blessing of the Club to cross that bridge. And I said that if this man is going to make this run, if it’s credible, and if he really gets the wind—and, like I said, Kirstin Replogle, who is white, saying that this man is—and so, these are people who I trust.

05-04:17:48

Mair:

And so, the man was definitely what he portended to be. And I think that the blessing of his running for president and what it really pushed America to—because, remember, Hillary Clinton and all the others, they pushed hard. And this I have to borderline-agree with Donald [Trump] on, because a lot of the racist tropes about his birth and who he is, Bill Clinton and they went there. Because I remember Congressman [Jim] Clyburn calling Bill Clinton out and almost calling him a racist, saying, “I understand competition. You just don’t go that far.”

And, even still, when they pushed him to the so-called controversy of “clinging to their guns and bibles” [in April 2008], it is true because this is the fear that even Trump to this day uses to pull out that, “you’re attacking our guns and God is on our side.” And Barack wasn’t putting down, but he was challenging people to get beyond their fear, dealing with the rational over the irrational, moving beyond the politics or “silly season,” as he would call it, of the usual. He said, “Let’s deal with real issues.”

05-04:19:04

Mair:

So, while it’s hard for some to see through the fact that he’s a real truth teller, I was amazed that someone is as wholesome but coming in a Black package.

This guy literally was like the kid from *Happy Days*—oh, goodness, I hate when this happens, but anyway, the main character from *Happy Days* with the red hair.

05-04:19:35

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, the Ron Howard character?

05-04:19:36

Mair: The Ron Howard character [Richie Cunningham], yes. So, I'm looking at a Black Ron Howard character, the straight-laced guy. I said, "He's got to have some brother-isms in there," and he was just crisp. He's sharp, crisp. And the stuff that even comedians to this day—what they make, they make from Barack. He just perfectly cuts things. And his voice is just great. You see why this guy was not only probably a great litigator and a great constitutional lawyer, but you also see why he was the editor of the *Harvard Law Review*, because the guy was just sharp on analytical, evidence-based type of—you can't beat somebody with a bad argument when they're constantly hammering you with the law and the facts, and all you're left with is pounding the table. And this man, he brought it all.

05-04:20:37

Eardley-Pryor: With the rise to national and global stardom that Obama represented, did you see doors opening within the environmental justice movement or with the [Sierra Club's] Diversity Committee movement in the wake of Obama's success?

05-04:20:49

Mair: I think it inspired because what happened was that this man was really moving. He was personifying diversity. His mother, he was the embodiment of the taboo of a Black male with a white woman; and then the other taboo, single-parent child; and the other taboo, a guy with a name, a Muslim name. And yet, he was pulling America to a higher diverse nature, saying "These are not negatives. Diversity is beauty." And the man was the personification of the beauty of what diversity is and what it could be. And the themes of hope on top of that, he was pushing it to a higher level.

So, working on the Diversity Committee while this guy was gearing up to run for president was like the perfect place. You couldn't have scripted a perfect time to be having this fight and this conversation within the Sierra Club.

[A portion of this interview has been sealed until 2045.]

05-04:22:27

Mair: And as we dug into that conversation of the Club—where's its origins, what it was rooted in—this is what made me start to look, because I just thought looking at the Sierra Club and the bridging and the action between the EJ [environmental justice] movement and these other pieces, and bringing what my connections were, but I never, ever, at that instant, or even in the earliness, up until that point, asked really the nature of the Club, its deep origins. Who

were the people that founded this organization, the organization of white men, the exclusivity?

And so, we actually did a timeline of the history. And that's when you found out it actually was only exclusive. You had to be on invites. You had to be of a certain economic class and socioeconomic strata. So, even the myth that everybody was living today as the Sierra Club, they were not—in fact, John Boyd Thacher was the archetype of what they wanted in the old, original Club.

05-04:23:32

Eardley-Pryor: John Boyd Thacher being the [former owner of the] Helderberg Escarpment here outside of Albany?

05-04:23:35

Mair: Helderberg Escarpment, the wealthy upper crust guy. He was that bourgeoisie, wealthy—

05-04:23:45

Eardley-Pryor: Somebody you'd call a "save?" One of the "saves?"

05-04:23:47

Mair: One of the "saves," but more importantly one of the gentry class and caste, wealth and property. His idea was seeing this, saving it, but—yes, seeing the value, but then putting his mansion on top of it. Put a great house on top of it. But still, these are the people that John Muir appealed to. John Muir appealed to Teddy Roosevelt. And Teddy Roosevelt was one of our big, wealthy, Patrician families. So that was the early Club.

So, when we did that analysis in the diversity, of breaking it down, that's when you start—I did, but you did not really do that class and caste analysis. I did not do that until that point. And so, that's when the "who are you" questions of John Muir—this is the guy, the immigrant Scotsman. Then, who are the others that founded this Club? And that's when the Joe LeConte comes up.

05-04:24:50

Eardley-Pryor: That's where this piece, for you, is when you realized LeConte's role?

05-04:24:53

Mair: This is when I'm looking at the history of exclusion and the evolution of the Club, the privilege, and how these things—so, this is where it flips the trip, the trigger or the switch with regards to: Who were they? What was their pedigree? What was their antecedents?

05-04:25:12

Eardley-Pryor: Is this where you learned the LeConte brothers [Joseph and John] were working in the Confederate powder works?

05-04:25:15

Mair: This is when I learned that he was a slave owner.

05-04:25:24

Eardley-Pryor: From South Carolina?

05-04:25:25

Mair: From South Carolina.

[A portion of this interview has been sealed until 2045.]

05-04:36:33

Mair: So, I proceeded along with the [Diversity] Committee. And so, we ended up producing and working together collaboratively. Like I said, that was a very powerful meeting because there's a lot of things that was coming out of it. But what was good about it is that, as we got to the end and we got to the end with the work product, and we got a product that we now had to get to the [Sierra Club] Board [of Directors]. As they say, now you had a policy document that the Board had to consider. I figured that, "Okay, I served this through," so I figured that, "Oh well, given how this"—so, when Mark Walters came up to me and asked me to run for the Board—

05-04:37:14

Eardley-Pryor: In the wake of this issue with the Diversity Committee?

05-04:37:17

Mair: I said, "You got the right guy?"

05-04:37:21

Eardley-Pryor: What was the policy document that you put forward to the Board that the Diversity Committee produced?

05-04:37:27

Mair: Well, that's one of the things I did not—you can definitely pull up the report of the Diversity Committee to the Board. But that was the finished product that we had and advanced. So, we had completed our particular work product, and that was what was to go forward, which eventually would lead to our Diversity Plan and our Diversity Policy. It was a draft plan, that final report that went up to the Board that had to be ratified and followed through on.

05-04:37:59

Eardley-Pryor: Did the Board do that then?

05-04:38:02

Mair: I think they received the plan. And then, the actual voting on it and adopting it, that was when the strategic argument was getting forward, moving forward [and needing] an advocate to make that happen. And I think that that's where Mark Walters felt that I would be that advocate running for the Board, that you need to have a voice that knows the work, knows all the things that we've done, what's in that plan, and move it forward and advance it.

05-04:38:30

Eardley-Pryor: So, the committee—the Diversity Committee—moving that onto the Board is what helped inspire people to come to you and say, “We think you should be on the Board?”

05-04:38:37

Mair: Yes, because of my years of work, that metaphorical bridge I talked about.

05-04:38:44

Eardley-Pryor: You did eventually run for the Board of Directors pretty soon after? 2011, I think, is when you get elected onto it.

05-04:38:48

Mair: Yes, in 2011. So, you got to put together your candidacy. It takes about a few months.

05-04:38:55

Eardley-Pryor: What were your thoughts when you decided to run?

05-04:38:58

Mair: Like anything else, once I’m in, I’m in. It’s very straightforward. I knew exactly where we needed to go. I knew exactly where and what we needed to do. And, I felt that with Obama right now really running gangbusters, I felt that now is the time for us really to get the Club really into a place and the space to really do, as they say, to expand its tent, to expand its umbrella.

05-04:39:26

Eardley-Pryor: That’s the year before reelection, Obama’s reelection.

05-04:39:30

Mair: Yeah. So, now was the time to really lean in. The Club was ready to expand and now really have a deep conversation. I just don’t think that before Obama the Club could have done that. I think Obama had started a national conversation, and the pushback against him exposed a lot of the fault lines that we see today. And so, Americans are really clear on what side they want to fall on and that these fault lines and these pitfalls are what really divide us.

And that is, primarily, the conversation in and around race, and calling it out and calling the behaviors and aggressions and all these things that feed into these patterns that allow us to, as they say, live in our worlds “separate and unequal.” And so, I think that Obama allowed for that deeper penetrating conversation that we were already having in the [Diversity] Committee. But now that we had a Diversity Plan out there, we now had something to really give the Club, as they say, a decking to walk on, to work through this, talk through it.

05-04:40:52

Eardley-Pryor: Taking on that role of then pushing through the diversity piece—

05-04:40:57

Mair: Evangelizing.

05-04:40:59

Eardley-Pryor: Did that ever feel like a burden to you?

05-04:41:01

Mair: Evangelizing. Like I said, the issue is preaching the gospel. Preaching diversity is preaching civil rights, preaching human rights. Preaching was essential to the environmental movement. What we talked about was the healthy environment. When we talk about wetlands or any complex ecosystem, we know that it is not a monoculture. And the Sierra Club institutionally has been a monoculture.

And, in order for it to survive, in order for it to thrive, it had to get beyond that monoculture of behavior, that monoculture of privilege, that monoculture of assumptions of even what is an environmentalist and what is even environmentalism. So, this plan, this opportunity, needed someone who could be forward-facing but also be a passionate advocate and be a passionate environmental steward to really shepherd this through. And, my life experience, my life of activism, pretty much embodied that. And, for me to go to the Board, to advocate, to help advance this plan, my voice, I think, was the smart choice.

05-04:42:05

Mair: I can now understand the wisdom behind Mark [Walters] pushing me and saying, "You've got to do this." And then, I did not think about it as much. But, when I got to the place, when the moment came and when the actions and being on those Board committees and the actual debating—because when you're that one in fifteen, it was really critical whose voice was being heard, because you had Board members who were pushing back.

You had Board members who felt that this was not the place. You're getting beyond the mission of the Sierra Club. And so, when you have someone with my background who can then articulate, now that I had this bridge in place, who can now run back and forth, because now I had this institutional history of the struggle with the Environmental Justice Committee within the Sierra Club, of the nativist campaign called the Populace Committee within the Sierra Club.

05-04:43:33

Mair: This is the population debate. This is the Groundswell here, that whole movement to try to save the Club from those folks who believe that diversity—in essence, Hispanics and immigration—was a problem. So, these are actually old themes. They were playing out different. But I now had enough longitudinal experience. And as they say, not only just longitudinal experience but literally coming from the group.

If you think about it, I began with the group. Arbor Hill was supported by a group. I eventually worked through a group. I came in at the lowest organizing unit level. I rose up into a chapter. I became a chapter chair.

So, even the notion of the fact that here's this person of color coming in, you can't make an argument of tokenism because I walked the walk. I ran the gauntlet. In fact, I'd done more as a volunteer activist coming from group committees, group committees to chapter, chapter committees to chapter chair, and then volunteering on national committees, I actually walked the authentic walk.

05-04:44:48

Mair:

So, I was well equipped. I was well prepared to make that case, make that argument. And I've come through enough of the stations inside the organizations. I understood toxic behavior. I understood unwelcoming behavior because, remember, I knocked at the front door asking for help, then not as a member. But I was not welcome. So, all the things that the Diversity Committee was speaking to, and the reason why it was called into being, these were things that I experienced firsthand and at the forefront.

Remember, I chose to come in. But when I first knocked on the door, if I were white, I would have definitely been treated differently. If I was a white person with an incinerator in my back yard and solid waste, I don't think there would have been a question. There would not have been an issue. But race mattered. Class, caste mattered. Perception, this Black guy that's six-foot-seven, 280 pounds, coming into a room, mattered. The fact that he didn't ask permission mattered.

05-04:45:58

Eardley-Pryor: We've got to pause here.

(break in audio)

05-04:46:00

Eardley-Pryor: Okay, Aaron. So, serving on the Board of Directors of the Sierra Club, that's a pretty huge, powerful transition role.

05-04:46:06

Mair: Huge role.

05-04:46:07

Eardley-Pryor: And, the role that you see for yourself within that Board is to what?

05-04:46:12

Mair: Well, two things. The first thing I wanted is really, now I've really got to dig into the depth and breadth of this organization that is 120, then I think 120 years old. We made the 125th, but anyway a little over 100 years old. And I had to really dig into this legacy and history. So, my background is to dig in and find more so I can know a little bit more about the antecedents. I already

had a taste of some of that in the Diversity Planning Committee when they did the whole Club thing.

And so, this where you start looking at, at least reading about the organizing founder. Who was the original founders? And so, that's when you really, like I said, you knew a little bit about LeConte. But then you're really like, holy smokes. And then, you also go and check out John Muir just to make sure he is not of the same ilk. It's like holy smokes. And by that, I mean you find out the eugenics history. You find out all the other dark stuff. And you say, "Well, okay, well, this is its antecedents." And you set that aside.

05-04:47:20

Mair: So, a couple of things was going over the committee structures, and then when you're elected, then saying, "What am I going to prove?" I had that little period of mulling over. I was just elected. I found out I got elected [in spring 2011]. It was really exciting.

05-04:47:43

Eardley-Pryor: Onto the [Sierra Club] Board [of Directors]?

05-04:47:43

Mair: Onto the Board.

[A portion of this interview has been sealed until 2045.]

05-05:05:50

Mair: And, so my tenure and term on the Board was pretty much in awe, watching Mike Brune grow into his office and grow into his space and grow into his leadership.

05-05:06:06

Eardley-Pryor: I'm thinking about your presidency of the Sierra Club. You began that presidency in May of 2015—

05-05:06:11

Mair: Before I began, two things I did. When I came on, at that point in time, I also made a commitment not to do or go after something that I'm familiar with. So, as a Board member, you get to choose the committees and the things that you work on. And a lot of people, when they get on the Board, they want to make sure that the tree in the forest that they came from has a lot of fertilizer. And, my approach is antithetical. I want to go and do something entirely different.

And so, Allison Chin says, "If you really want to learn about the organization, join the FinCom." I said, "I don't know anything about FinCom."

05-05:06:51

Eardley-Pryor: What's the FinCom?

05-05:06:52

Mair:

The FinCom is the Finance Committee. It is the entity that deals with the budgets, the allocation, everything. It is the financial skeleton and neural network of the organization. And so, as a brilliant choice, I joined the FinCom. So, my first four years of the Club was spent on the Finance Committee and literally understanding and learning and mastering the financial skeleton of the organization, how funds and resources were allocated, the varying roles, the varying budgets, and just looking at how the organization itself competed and used the funds effectively, how it moved funds around, the winning campaigns, the losing campaigns.

But that said, it was like that 50,000-foot altitude where you can really see where things were going. But you can also see where things were not going. And there were the inefficient places and spaces. So, that allowed me to be in the position during those four years to be what I call a fair advocate and an even broker. So, my thing is that if something was working, I backed it. If something wasn't, I was there amongst the committee to challenge the activist and/or the leads or the team leads or the staff saying, "We need to perhaps change."

05-05:08:10

Eardley-Pryor:

What did you take away from that time? What were the things that you then brought to your presidency from learning on the FinCom?

05-05:08:16

Mair:

Well, the thing is that you learn to temper your advocacy with the fiscal realities. And this is something most activists don't do. Most activists—the David Brower approach is to spend everything you've got and "born to be wild." Fire all your guns at once and explode into space. And so, a lot of folks feel that we want to do this. We don't want to deal with bookkeeping. We just want to do our action, just write a check. And this is general. You see the lack of real deep accountability.

For as much as you think that an organization is together, you realize that everybody in the Sierra Club is just like the average person managing their own checkbook. They make mistakes. They goof up. They don't get the stuff filed on time. They're chasing. They're trying to find receipts that they lost because they did not sit down timely. So, there's the assumption and the theory of bookkeeping that we assume that every activist—but we're activists.

05-05:09:10

Mair:

So, you get to understand that. But when you multiply that times the 2.5 million members of the Club and that they're doing stuff, there's millions of pieces of paper that you've got to chase after. So you end up developing an appreciation of what the manager—now, I was the president, and it was a headache at the Atlantic chapter. But I can now see how the headache was multiplied times the sixty-plus chapters and how guys like [Sierra Club's

Chief Financial Office] Lou Barnes are fiscal staff. To me, I don't know why they're not three inches from a stroke every night.

I thought I would never get along with fiscal types, and these guys I came to love because once you appreciate their craft, they really help keep the lights on, the trains running. If you want to know the lights are on and the trains are running on time, it's these guys. The activists are the mad people driving the trains. But these guys are the ones that are constantly modulating and tweaking, making sure that the engines don't blow up and that they don't derail, and if they do derail, that they don't do any damage. These guys are there at the switch. And you develop a deep respect for a part of the organization that you normally take for granted and don't appreciate.

05-05:10:43

Eardley-Pryor: Was it hard? Coming from this decades of activism and being the firebrand and the leader, was it challenging to then be on the financial side?

05-05:10:52

Mair: But, see, what you don't get, and what it took me even right to this moment to appreciate, the thing that brought down Arbor Hill Environmental Justice, the thing that brought down W. Haywood Burns Environmental Education, is I did not have a Lou Barnes and a Hamilton Leong, and that I got caught up in the passion of the activism, and I got caught up in the passion of the work and the urgency of the work.

The switches, the circuits, the fuel for that, I left entrusted in the hands of people who really weren't competent to handle that. And it brought my organization, and it brought the work and everything down. So, this was something coming from a wound that I had to understand. And more importantly, there's two pieces—trepidation and for you to make sure it doesn't happen to this organization. Learning about those institutional controls, the notions of the fiscal term of due diligence and how is this organization tracking this, and how are we—so, I come from that wound.

05-05:11:47

Mair: So that way I can absolutely be bullish as a director from the FinCom saying, "No, you guys need to take care of this. No, these reports need to be done right." And being that Board backing up the staff, because the pushback that these guys get from activists and other Board members who are—there are Board members who feel that these guys are hampering and hamstringing the movement, and that these guys are the sources behind why things are not getting funded and therefore not being funded right.

Well, what they don't see is how those activists are not doing the work and how that work, if it's not done right, can bring the organizations down. So, I've seen that beast. And I felt that burn and that pain. And, my God, you don't want an organization with this many thousands of employees brought to its knees because everybody just said this is something that we can neglect.

And that's something from that experience that I know that's real. It can happen to any organization. So, going into the FinCom with even that level of sensitivity—my backing of Lou and them and their presentation and defending the budgets that they put forward—I could robustly step in.

05-05:13:26

Mair:

Now, Lou is probably wondering why is this guy so vigorously in my corner. It's because something—in fact, I haven't talked about what brought down Arbor Hill until we've had this interview. And now Lou Barnes and Hamilton and them will learn that I know what a fiscal crisis is. And I know that if staff and volunteers run amok and are negligent with their resources, they can absolutely destroy any organization.

[A portion of this interview has been sealed until 2045.]

05-05:16:37

Mair:

One of the biggest problems I found that the Sierra Club was having was that a lot of these environmental issues are impacting low-income and communities of color, and that a lot of our activists and volunteers and paid staff were dealing with working class and blue collar communities. In fact, in Pennsylvania, there was an issue with a community of unionized workers at a coal plant who happened to be African-American. And you just don't go in and talk about shutting down a coal plant and putting people out of work and not have a plan—what we call “just transition” and how you deal with it. It's easy to talk about shutting down coal plants, but we'd better be talking about what the alternatives are.

05-05:17:18

Eardley-Pryor:

What were some of those alternatives then?

05-05:17:21

Mair:

Well, the thing is that the biggest alternative that we should be investing our portfolio, having as, I think, a big grant coming from a Bloomberg, not only should we be pursuing the big money there, but also we should be having a bigger labor campaign. And the big labor campaign, Dean Hubbard, who's no longer with the organization, who I had a lot of respect—brilliant attorney, brilliant labor activist. We have to start really having more than just the words “just transition” or the term, but really have a portfolio of just transition options. We should be really investigating in that space.

Where is our posture on green jobs? Now, you've got people running around, “We want EVs, electronic vehicles, and all these other things.” But they don't go the next step and ask about, “Well, is the EV being produced with clean labor practices? Have we defined what clean labor practices are?” Clean labor practice is, to me, unionized, living wage, and not exploiting workers. That's a critical piece. That's why Donald Trump was able to take advantage of the coal miners in West Virginia. This is why the coal miners went against Barack Obama.

05-05:18:45

Mair:

He's talking about the clean power and getting to clean energy, but the largesse of our government is not immediately putting in the WPA—the Work Progress Administration—jobs, or the New Deal-type jobs for these men to no longer kill themselves with black lung. You give them the WPA jobs, or you give them that infrastructure job so that they can transition out, you would have them to this day.

But, everybody gets caught up in the need for the action. But they don't get caught up in the processes. But Republicans are very deliberate about their process. They want their tax cut because they want those billions in their pockets. They don't care what they've got to cut to get it. But Democrats start dancing around delivering on those clean jobs. And I think the biggest mistake to this day is that we are not heavily pushing the federal government on serious clean job infrastructure development.

05-05:19:40

Mair:

This is not a joke. We need to do clean infrastructure development right now. And that could definitely begin in places where the highest need, like the West Virginias of the world, or even if they have to relocate. But the point of the matter is giving the labor those opportunities where they are part of that clean energy solution. Just shutting stuff down, but just having a left hand without the right, there's no handshake here.

So, the issue is thinking holistically about the problem rather than just saying, "Okay, we've just got to get rid of carbon, and we just can't pay attention to anything else." So no, we need to classify what clean energy practices are. Not only is it clean fuels, but also the bigger environment. What does it mean to humanity? What does it mean to labor? What does it mean to all the subsystems that have to depend upon it? And we have to approach that holistically.

05-05:20:33

Mair:

And I think that we have not spent enough time in that space because we're just caught up in the metrics. Because we're getting \$50 million from Bloomberg, so we're caught up in what they call the key performance indicators, KPIs, for this particular grant. And, great, but the ancillary pieces are being neglected. And so you're creating as much harm as you're doing good.

05-05:20:55

Eardley-Pryor:

When Bloomberg came forward and agreed to fund, in the wake of the Chesapeake absence, the Beyond Coal campaign, were you still serving on the Board?

05-05:21:06

Mair:

Yes. I was definitely part of the vote to approve those monies.

05-05:21:11

Eardley-Pryor: And also still on the Financial Committee?

05-05:21:13

Mair:

And also a part of the Financial Committee. And then the question was then, also by then being on the Board, then I was able to talk about the gaps and deficiencies of, “Yeah, we’ve got this [Beyond] Coal campaign. Well, let’s transition somebody [from] EJ [environmental justice] work. If we’re phasing this out, then let’s recycle those workers who have all these skills. Think about it. We spent over a decade in creating their skill set. Why are we blindly letting them go so we can just hire coal people who don’t even have their skill set? And you have to retool these people.

So, here you’ve got people who are tooled up to deal with poor, burdened communities, and who are going to have to transition off of dirty fuels. And they’re all working class. And so, you now have the skill set of people that have the empathy, the capacity to understand the needs of these communities and then help them to deal with the transition to clean energy and clean energy prospects but also shape some of the solutions.

05-05:22:12

Mair:

But the thing is that there’s going to be pushback. So, why are you going to hire some kid that’s fresh out of wherever, put them in a place where they’re just new to the Sierra Club, they’re a new hire? There’s nothing against that. But it’s something called job experience. What is the quality of the worker that is the face of the organization in these environments?

And if you come across insensitive or dismissive, you may be creating more enemies than allies. And then these people run over to guys like Donald Trump, who start talking about clean coal and keeping them alive. So now, you need those votes, as they say, for a healthy democracy. And so, we’ve got to think more than just the limited action. But we’ve got to care about the workers. And the thing is that I’ve always said as [Sierra Club] President, “A critical part to the degradation on the environment is the degradation of the American worker, the laborer.” And, these are class arguments that go back to Marx himself. It is powerful and true. You cannot get to here without the antecedents of the conditions of the workers and the laboring masses.

05-05:23:28

Eardley-Pryor:

This sounds to me like part of what became the Democracy Initiative under your presidency of the Sierra Club. When you were on the Board, when you joined the Board in the early 2010s, did you have a clear sense, “I want to move up to the presidency? I want to be there?”

05-05:23:46

Mair:

Yes. And let me tell you why. I wanted to, within those four years, understand the true networks and operations. The best place to do that was the FinCom. And I felt that once I had sufficient understanding and knowledge of the

operations of the organization, that I want to then pivot to the presidency. We got two things. We embarked upon a strategic plan.

05-05:24:15

Eardley-Pryor: Who's "we"?

05-05:24:16

Mair:

We is the Board, the fifteen-member Board. Director Loren Blackford was, again, filling the organization—in order for it to move forward, it needed to have an outline, a blueprint on how it's going to move forward, that strategic plan. And she wove into that strategic plan our diversity work and whatnot. So, we got the diversity policy passed. But then to operationalize that diversity policy, you had to have a strategic plan.

And so, that was the two, the handshake that we needed. And then, the next piece that I saw you need now, once you got these things in hand, you needed a forward-facing president that's going to pound and market and sell this and drive this value and nurture this value into the organization.

05-05:25:04

Mair:

And so, my role when I said, "I'm going to run," two things I had was that not only was I going to work on advancing this plan and this policy and the goals of diversity, equity, inclusion; but I'm going to go into—my goal, the lofty goal, was to visit every chapter. So, I asked a couple of people. I said, "When's the last time the Club president's been to all the chapters?" They go, "Jesus Christ." They go, "Nobody does that." I said, "Well, we're going to do that now."

So, I had what I call my Southern Strategy. I literally said, "I'm going to pound this in the South and then work my way up to the other northern and East Coast states and bounce around. My intention in going into the South was twofold because this is where the EJ [Environmental Justice] Committees were. These were the places where tensions of inclusion and the pushback from the EJ [environmental justice] groups on the outside over the white [Sierra] Club was happening, in the South.

I figured that I could go into the South and lead a lot of the DEI [diversity, equity, inclusion] conversation and work with the chapters, as they had their annual gatherings. So I targeted the annual gatherings. And I gave that diversity, equity, inclusion. And I gave actually it from my perspective in tying in the history of my journey into the environmental movement, from the environmental justice movement, but also who I am. So, it was also a way of introducing Aaron Mair.

05-05:26:49

Mair:

So, part of my slideshow, I began with Dr. Martin Luther King and John Muir on one slide and the parallel of their slogans, basically of things being tied together and that we all depend upon the mutuality of man from Dr. King and

the thread theory of John Muir. So, I had that on a slide. And then the rhetorical “Who am I?” and then I introduced myself. And I do it from the lens of what would Wendell Berry do in that role? And I just assumed that, again, the rifle activist is that farmer. And then I go into my rural heritage and my true origins and my advancement into the environment.

But then I also bring them into that journey from the eyes of a slave. I said, “Here’s where it begins,” and I work back. And then, in taking them on that route, then I say, “And here’s where the Sierra Club was. Here’s where Joe LeConte was. This was part.” So, I weave that whole Joe LeConte narrative that I had now picked up from when we had that meeting with Angela Park and the Diversity Committee and looking at the old Club, its history, its founders, and now drilling in who they are.

05-05:28:03

Mair:

So I started to deconstruct our class and caste, and dialectically lay that over to the caste and class of my family, and then run them parallel going forward. And what really gets people—because a lot of folks think that this environmental movement is a kind of luxury of the activist, because there are those who believe there’s the pure conservation side, and there’s that old Victorian consumer of recreational outside. And so, therefore you have to have the material luxury and dependence. But I’m saying it’s just not consumerism, but it’s also a point of dependency. There’s a point of culture. There’s a bunch of heritage. So, I wanted to pull in that Wendell Berry set. So, there’s all of these things.

But even at the point of consumerism and at the point of class and caste, look at what happened to those populations that had been chased off their land. They’ve been chased off. So, you have the privilege, and here’s where you are. But here’s why you have that. Not people per se, but institutionally, looking at the institutions that have created the environmental movement, the inequities and then the tensions that we are all acting out and playing out.

05-05:29:11

Mair:

So, my talk actually takes them through that. But it ultimately leads to the point of movement building, so what was divided but pulling it together, and then the fact of commonality of that. We’re all seeking the same things, and really driving home the point that there’s no such thing as a Black environment. You’ve got to tell them, because a lot of people think that when you talk about environmental justice they think it’s Black environment. No. You’ve got to deal with the issue of civil rights and tying the environment into laws. And you need equality. And this is why the democracy piece is very critical and that these are extensions of a healthy democracy. And so a lot of deficiencies and inequality, it’s not really just the people, but it’s the legal institutional framework by which these things are erected.

05-05:29:54

Eardley-Pryor: On that note then, what is or was the Democracy Initiative that became such a big part of your [Sierra Club] presidency?

05-05:30:01

Mair: What was critical was, because at that time we did not have the Voting Rights Act. The Voting Rights Act was one of the critical pieces of the Republican attacks on suppressing the Black vote. So you had a couple of things that are going on. You had the REDMAP of 2010.

05-05:30:18

Eardley-Pryor: Redlining? Hold on, 2010 red map?

05-05:30:21

Mair: Yes, the 2010 REDMAP [short for Redistricting Majority Project, a project of the U.S. Republican State Leadership Committee to increase Republican control of Congressional seats and state legislators by various means including re-shaping electoral district boundaries. See Julian E. Zelizer, "The Power that Gerrymandering has Brought to Republicans," *The Washington Post* (June 17, 2016); Elizabeth Kolbert, "How Redistricting Turned America from Blue to Red," *The New Yorker* (June 27, 2016).]

So, what happened was, what was playing out was that now you had all these mal-apportioned districts. You had the Republican controlling the shape of—so, in other words, you had structurally set up that forty percent of America would control seventy percent of the outcomes. And so, what about the sixty percent of America? So, we only get thirty percent power?

And so, you have to talk about a healthy democracy. And what does that mean? Because right now in the Sierra Club, most of its action and activism, especially in the space of rulemaking and regulatory framework, trying to get everything from national monuments and passing progressive laws. But you've got to have legislators who believe in those things. And so, you have to connect your democracy to your legislator, not through just your actions.

05-05:31:27

Mair: Because right now, folks in the traditional Sierra Club activist mode is used to, "We're going to sue." They always think about the power to litigate. But that is a reactive mode to once a law has been passed. What happens when you think about selecting a good politician who doesn't pass bad laws? What about doing it on the front end rather than the back end? In fact, the front end is actually easier and more efficient and more empowering and more sustainable than reacting to the whims of the guy that you don't control, because he can come up with another piece of bad legislation tomorrow.

One of the things that we saw with the attack on the Affordable Care Act was that they can be persistent, or the attack on women's reproductive rights. They will structure and try to get the judges. At the end of the day, it doesn't stop. So, the answer is you can absolutely spend a small fortune as an

environmental organization and exhaust it on just reacting to bad zoning, bad policy, bad laws that are destructive for the environment.

05-05:32:20

Mair:

So, a healthy democracy is getting the Club and folks to see that you have a lot in common with the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. You have a lot in common with all these other organizations that you think are outside, but you're actually fighting for the same thing. The issue is finding that commonality and then building allies amongst yourselves so that the Sierra Club is not weakened, but it's actually strengthened. And it's also picking up that new synergy from those relationships.

It doesn't dilute us to expand our tent. In fact, the point is that we are trying to do what? The core mission. Enlist humanity. How do you enlist humanity, okay? Well, fundamentally in the United States as you enlist humanity in the United States, it's through our democracy. It's empowering our democracy. It's empowering our humanity. And once people are engaged and they see you as one of the change agents that bring that gift of power to them, they reciprocate. They become your ally.

05-05:33:22

Mair:

And so, that's the point. Once you enlist them, they are then on your side. And so, as the range of ideas and values that they believe and they want to see legislated, they will also put your values there on the table, too, because they also see in your values a mutual welfare, that mutual dependency. They see that thread, that string of all things are hitched together, the thread of the universe of hitching. And, all of that's occurring within the broader context of environment. So, it doesn't dilute conservation. It doesn't dilute equal systems protection. Actually, it enhances. It builds awareness.

05-05:34:04

Eardley-Pryor:

How does this broadening of the environmental movement—by bringing in a democratic process and making the movement link to greater democracy and building the environmental movement that way—how does it work on the ground? The theory I get it. How does it become activated?

05-05:34:22

Mair:

Well, two things. It is having an authentic voice that speaks to both communities, number one. So, coming from the civil rights—

05-05:34:30

Eardley-Pryor:

So, you are that voice?

05-05:34:31

Mair:

Absolutely. This is what I talked about, that metaphor of that bridge. Now, we've got that bridge. Now it's getting people to traverse that bridge to both sides and to share that journey.

05-05:34:41

Eardley-Pryor: To hear this message.

05-05:34:42

Mair:

And so, two things. One of the things that we did was that, in preparation of me going to any of the chapters, I asked them to link up and find the president of the NAACP and have them invite that NAACP president to the meeting. And we would have a sermon with both. And I would link those movements together. I would go through and explain the connection, because one of the things that the NAACP does very well is voter registration, voter mobilization, voter organizing. What it doesn't do well is the targets. Vote for what?

They perfected over fifty years of mobilizing, and they got so much because that was the thing that was always attacked. So, they were now effectively—so, you got good on rope-a-doping, but now what about the punches? What about the counterpunches? So, the counterpunches are the policy pieces. And that's where the environmental movement comes in, because what are our people dying of? Asthma, diabetes, basically chronic diseases and illnesses that are linked right to the environment.

05-05:35:50

Mair:

I come from the environmental justice movement where I sat in front of an incinerator and watched chronic diseases amplified, exacerbated or increase as a result of exposure. But, I have to translate that. This is the beauty of the environmental justice movement, is translate that to the general population so they can link that the complex processes of this industrial operation is infecting their health. And that affects it because it's polluting the air, the water, the soil.

And I said, "Now, generalize that to your food when you go down to the Hudson River to fish or to the bayou to fish or the creek to fish. What happens when that's also affected? If you're affected by it, flora and fauna are affected by it. Your collard greens, when you go out and get your collard greens, what happens when that stuff is on it? Didn't I say here's a thing called bioaccumulation? And so, how your body as a top predator within the food chain now starts to store all these toxins coming from a polluted environment."

05-05:36:49

Mair:

And they'd be like, "Oh, so environmentalism is about me dealing with these racists over here who run this thing and won't hire me; but they're poisoning my air and my food, and they're dumping the stuff, and I can't get my crawdads." And so, the Black community, they catch on quick. And so, they start to say, "Oh, so that's environmentalism, too? Well, we call that civil rights." I go, "A-ha."

So, helping that pedagogy—and it's bidirectional even amongst whites, because they're blind to the fact that your voting rights allow you to let legislators who shaped the regulations and the discharge and what's being allowed to be polluted and, as they say, and dispelled into the environment. So, you're showing where these things happen and their realities. And so, that bridge allows you to translate and walk across.

05-05:37:44

Eardley-Pryor: That's certainly one thing. It's getting that message out. So, how does that get activated then?

05-05:37:49

Mair: Well, the thing is that the activation comes at the point where you're having engagement activities. So, one of the things we did was called Journey for Justice. We linked up with the NAACP, and we were part of that Selma march from Selma to Washington, DC. So once you got the awareness, then it was, what are these shared activities that we can do together to build democracy?

So, one of the things we did to not only as the presidents of these organizations—labor rights, religion, congressmen—we all lined up big issue voting rights because all these things are tied to that. But the Journey for Justice, the big justice for the planet, for the environment, for humanity, for all these things—we realized we were actually at the second wave of the biggest new civil rights movement, which now is not just Blacks. Now the planet is in peril, and we are all in peril.

05-05:38:46

Mair: So that Journey for Justice March was then not only enlisting folks to show up. But we told chapters and groups along the way, "This is what you can do, and this is why this is important. And we've got to march from Selma. We're not asking you to march, but if you can march, march." And so, we had a whole program, what we're marching for, what the agenda was, et cetera. And the route was laid out.

And this went out to chapters and groups from Alabama all the way to Washington, DC. And what made that march successful—just like in the old days of the civil rights marches and the freedom rides—when Blacks and whites truly come together, it's transformative. What it meant for folks of the NAACP to see whites along the route for that whole route, come out and show up, chapters and groups just taking it like a relay race, the people in the movement and the march were like the baton. But, the Sierra Club activists were coming out, helping hand off that baton to the next chapter, to the next group.

05-05:39:55

Mair: And they brought water. They brought food. They brought shelter. They brought song. They brought hugs. They brought praise. And, the effect that that had upon the NAACP marchers and also Sierra Club marchers that were

still in that march, that built a solidarity. And so, all of a sudden the words and deeds of the Sierra Club became part of the lore of that day, of that song, of that march.

And so when the NAACP president, Pastor [William] Barber, and other NAACP persons, when they sing about their movement, listen to them now. Environmentalism is right in there. They link the environment. They link the environment. Before, you would have, if you listened, you just have it on jobs, civil rights, the right to vote, food, education programs, incarceration. And all of a sudden, the environment is linked in there. Air quality is linked in there.

And because we did that work, when President Obama came out with the Clean Power Plan, the community nationwide was conditioned to receive it. So, this Democracy Initiative, this Journey for Justice, this fusion of the movements, actually conditioned the general population to really see. And this is what was really powerful. Because when Obama came out with the Clean Power Plan, which was also a climate agenda, he led with the Surgeon General. That's very powerful, because how do most people deal with the environment? It's not just the heat. It's what the effect on their health is. And so, what if that public health message, people can now symbolically see that my health is tied to the air, the water and the soil? My rights are tied to that. So, it's a very powerful messaging device.

05-05:41:53

Eardley-Pryor: What role did you play? I'm sorry.

05-05:41:55

Mair: So that work, that work was like, I was, number one, an advocate of that. I'm a public health professional. I'm a public health professional. In the defeating of the incinerator, it was a public health analysis attack on the incinerator, not about what they were permitted and regulated to do, because that would have been a traditional Sierra Club attack. Or a traditional environmentalist attack would be to look at what are they regulated to do, or why are they regulated to do that? And what is the lethal dose of this and that? You move from that to say, "No, people have a right to health."

And so, when you start to talk about lives lost and lives saved, asthma cases reduced, directly or indirectly, you could talk about—it's how do you want to talk about soot and coal and carbon pollution, okay? There's a number of ways that you can break it down. But the most real way you can break it down to people is that your children will have clean air. Your child will not have an asthma attack. You won't be like Yolanda Rivera of Nos Quedamos, dying in your bed, gasping for air.

05-05:43:02

Mair: So, you're able to convert complex environmental arguments into real public health, civil rights, voting rights. You convert them into symbols that they see. It's symbol translation. So when you're going back and forth across this

bridge, you're reading the signs along the way. You're sharing information. So, it's not just how the Sierra Club sees it. But it's also, how is it being translated in the eyes and operationally in the eyes of the NAACP, of the AFL-CIO, of the women's movement, of the LGBTQ? How are they translating this environmentalism?

But more importantly, what is their orientation and use of this environment? How are they approaching this? How are they connected to this? So, in the past, because our paths never passed in the night, everybody stayed on their banks of the river. You had no clue about their orientation. In fact, most people didn't care because that was not environmentalism. Well, not environmentalism as defined by who? But a true, deep environmentalist knows the words of John Muir, that everything's hitched together. So, you'd better care about what's happening and how they're interpreting it, and how they're seeing it, and how is it broken down.

05-05:44:12

Mair:

And here's the space where the one percent comes in, because if you don't care, then somebody else will translate that form. And they may translate in a way that, A, is not truthful, not accurate, but more importantly dangerous and deadly. When you can convince workers to work underground in the coal mine and to accept black lung death as a viable reason to have a living wage, there's nothing more criminal and evil than that, especially when you know that there are cleaner jobs to be had. And you can actually be part of the process and solution to define that.

And, that's where the space is that we should be in. We should not be just saying, "Do this, but ignore every other connection of humanity to this planet." The Sierra Club, to be a steward, you have to care about the whole garden. The dominion approach, meaning that you want to dominate the issue or dominate your particular point of view or dominate the particular advocacy point that you want to protect in the environment, that's antithetical to a person who's a true steward, who takes that genesis book that you want to cultivate the land, not only for your current generation but for future generations, but basically not deplete it. Repair it. Know how to restore it.

05-05:45:32

Mair:

You have to care about all the little things because what are the microbes and the critters, the fungi, all these things that make up the soil that we all stand on? These things are very critical. These movements are symbolic expressions by which we connect people and translate and break down the complex so that they actually see the commonality and place and space, not at the negation of one another but at the inclusion of one another.

05-05:46:00

Eardley-Pryor:

Did you get any pushback when you were trying to broaden this tent with the Democracy Initiative and creating solidarity with labor and with the NAACP and with LGBTQ groups? Did you get pushback within the Club?

05-05:46:13

Mair:

Well, yes, we get it right away. You've got a lot of people that say, "This is nothing." I got letters. My email box gets flooded that this is not environmentalism, this is civil rights stuff. This is nothing to do with us. It's nonsense. It's nonsense. And my point is that one of the other benefits of being a president is that you actually get to the bully pulpit of writing your own journal publicly and expressing and laying out some of your thoughts.

And, I was blessed to have an editor by the name of Tom Valtin. This is where our Sierra Club communications team and department are very critical. So, they whipped me and said, "You've got to get this written up," and they give me my deadlines. And sort of like you right now, keeping me on deadline to the extent that you can, but they get you thinking about what you're doing, and you know what's right and what's in your head and what's in your heart. So, articulating that, writing that out.

05-05:47:21

Eardley-Pryor:

What were the things you wrote out that you're talking about?

05-05:47:26

Mair:

"A Deeper Shade of Green" [by Aaron Mair, published March 9, 2017, on the Sierra Club website at <https://www.sierraclub.org/change/2017/03/deeper-shade-green>] was one of the more important pieces that I had to do, because I had to take my full journey, that full walk, and pull the threads of the environmental justice movement, the civil rights movement, the naturalist movement, the origins of the Sierra Club, its founder, Joe LeConte. Lay out the parallels of Joe LeConte's life and my life and my ancestry. Frame it so that people can see both worlds and the consequences of both worlds, and the hubris of one world and its impact upon another, breaking it down so that people can see the journey that the entire environmental movement—but we as a species—in this country have walked, and that we need to walk, and how we need to continue to walk, and that we can't do it apart, that we must do it together.

Tying that grand theory, tying that big picture theory of diversity, equity, inclusion at a deeper level, and that this thing, if you're really serious about being a deep environmentalist or you want to really be green, then you must go right on down to the nutrients within the soil. I don't care about the blades of grass above. That's nice and green. But that deeper shade, that comes from those healthy roots. That comes from that healthy soil. That comes from being anchored in the legacy and reality and knowing all that went in. And again, filtering out a lot of those toxins and poisons that are legacy within the soil, and helping the organism to be much more resilient.

05-05:48:58

Mair:

And to do that and to build that resilience, I felt compelled that I had to write "A Deeper Shade of Green," because I had to have the Club look at itself. It had to look at itself. It had to own what naturalism is. It had to own what the

old conservation movement is. What is today's conservation is really a late, modern twentieth century [movement]. But the early conservationist and naturalist movement was a racist, exclusive and dangerous movement. It actually sowed the seeds for future destruction. It sowed the seeds that allowed us to become complicit and tolerating industrial processes that are now killing the planet in the form of our use of carbon, which was present then.

Believe it or not, at the early twentieth century, they're now finding out that they actually talked about the blanket being run over. They knew the consequences. But because they felt that they were doing some conservation work, because they felt that the elite and wealthy were going outdoors and recreating, they had a moral license to still engage in immoral environmental conduct, in immoral environmental abuse.

05-05:50:05

Eardley-Pryor: "A Deeper Shade of Green" came out towards the end of your presidency, in March 2017.

05-05:50:09

Mair: Yes.

05-05:50:10

Eardley-Pryor: What kind of reaction did it cause?

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Mair: Mostly cathartic in that a lot of people never looked that deeply at the movement. They never looked at environmentalism that way. They never saw the deepness of connection of the environmental movement to all things. So, in other words, they've been reading John Muir's works and not understanding John Muir. They've been reading Wendell Berry's works but not understanding Wendell Berry. They've been reading the works of Dr. Martin Luther King and not understanding the works of Dr. Martin Luther King.

The mutuality of all of us, depending upon all of us, our survival is dependent upon our neighbors. It's dependent upon all the creatures, all the things within this planet. But our stewardship of those relationships, we don't have the luxury to hate our brother, hate our sister. We don't. And we don't have the luxury to destroy and deplete all the ecosystems, because at the end of the day it is humanity that's in the balance.

05-05:51:17

Mair: Think about it. Think about it. In my young daughter Olivia's lifetime—she's ten years old—the Great Barrier Reef lost eighty percent of its life-giving vitality. It's been bleached within her ten years. Think about that. Think about that. We're looking at ecosystems collapsing. Those are the feeder systems for our entire seafood web. And it's happening globally. And, some of the most

reactionary, cranky climate-denying folks, you've got a lot of them sitting down there in Australia.

05-05:52:02

Eardley-Pryor: This brings up an issue that I want to talk about with regard to climate issues. Speaking of a climate denier, Ted Cruz comes up. Tell me about this confrontation that you and Ted Cruz had. You were giving testimony in front of [the United States] Congress. What was the context?

05-05:52:18

Mair: Well, the context was regulation and that regulation within urban communities was killing entrepreneurship, specifically minority business. In other words, legislation like Obama's Clean Power Plan would ultimately hurt mom-and-pop African-American businesses, which is really an absurdity.

05-05:52:44

Eardley-Pryor: Wait, this was the Republican argument?

05-05:52:46

Mair: This was the whole theory. The whole thing was about regulation. It was really an attack upon the Clean Power Plan. But the framework was basically regulation and its impact on small business in low-income communities.

05-05:53:03

Eardley-Pryor: So, this is 2015. You were new in your [Sierra Club] presidency, called suddenly to testify on this regulation issue.

05-05:53:11

Mair: Right. So, the thing is that I'm prepared to talk about that in the sense that—listen, the biggest issues and the biggest causes of injustice in the Black community is, as they say, the adequate enforcement of regulations or even the provision of regulation, or in some cases regulations so bad that they allow toxic harm and toxic releases. The issue is not a regulation, but the proper anchoring of that regulation and the protection of human health and the environment, and having that as a balance—in other words, pushing out that precautionary principle.

So, I actually prepared almost forty pages of testimony that went in [the Congressional Record]. So, this is a document that went in. When you write out testimony, it's a sworn document, okay? And then when you go to a hearing, your oral testimony is basically on that. You give a little summary of that, and then you also swear to tell the whole truth. You're giving your sworn word. So, if you're going to get up there and start changing your story or flipping on your story, you not only discredited the work that you submitted, but you also discredited yourself.

05-05:54:11

Mair: So, the issue that Ted Cruz—and it's a debating tactic. This is the thing. African-Americans where I grew up, some things you just don't debate. And I

get that certain schools and cultures, they have a debate society and everything's up for debate, and it's a game of sparring. And there's a way you score and you win. But, life's too short, and people like me that come from the existence, we don't have the luxuries for that.

So, with that being said, Ted Cruz, part of his life and his existence and his recreation, even in college, was being a debater. So, in other words, you have to poke fun or tear apart the argument or somehow get them to trip up to discredit them, and so if you discredit them, therefore the argument is discredited. That's not the way it works in the court of law, because I spent, if you follow my career and my lifetime, at least several dozen times sworn as an expert witness, as a witness, as a plaintiff in countless points of litigation.

So, I already know that when I'm under oath and when I'm sworn, I'm going to tell the truth in my expert opinion as the facts that I have at hand. And I can testify only to the facts that I have and that I have presented. So, you're not getting somebody that doesn't know how to stand or sit before the court.

05-05:55:55

Eardley-Pryor: What did Cruz try to—what happened?

05-05:55:56

Mair: Well, two things. Well, a couple of ground rules—so, you got sworn testimony. Another thing that you don't see on TV is that you got so many minutes between when they ask a question, and you're allotted so many minutes. And then there's a clock, and there's a red light. And your mic goes on and goes off. So, the venue is actually kind of controlled.

So, what Mr. Cruz tried to seize upon is a citation within the document that I presented. And this was more relevant to Clean Power Plan, basically why it's important, and the ninety-seven percent consensus, which is, by the way, the NASA—

05-05:56:36

Eardley-Pryor: I need you to unpack this. So, in your forty-page document there's a footnote?

05-05:56:41

Mair: There's a footnote.

05-05:56:42

Eardley-Pryor: A citation?

05-05:56:43

Mair: There's a footnote citation within my document that relies upon the famous NASA study of the ninety-seven percent scientist consensus, ninety-seven men and women out of a hundred within the room that agreed that anthropogenic climate change is affecting the planet.

05-05:57:02

Eardley-Pryor: Ninety-seven percent of climate scientists say, “Hell yes, climate change is human-caused.”

05-05:57:10

Mair: So, if you got pancreatic cancer and you’re going to a hundred doctors, and ninety-seven in that room say, “We agree that you have pancreatic cancer,” and you’ve got three of them, and three other doctors, one is a sociologist, one’s an anthropologist, and one is a physics guy. I’ll be fair. One’s a physics guy. But they’re also doctors. And they disagree. So, the ad hominem argument is that, well, you’ve got three people that disagree.

So, in the eyes of the law, when you’re making these legal arguments, something called reasonable doubt means if you don’t have 100 percent certainty, there’s doubt in the room. So, what they then do is that because there’s doubt and there’s agreement, they then equate the doubt and agreement, even though they don’t—from my mathematical side, there’s no weight next to that doubt and agreement. So, when you just put doubt and agreement next to one, you’re now giving them what they call equal weight and equal standing, when they are not equal.

05-05:58:15

Eardley-Pryor: Is this what Ted Cruz did?

05-05:58:17

Mair: Well, not only did he try to do that, but he tried to illustrate it with a couple of arguments. He tried to argue, and he had these little slides that talk about the ice packs, that it was predicted that there would be no ice, according to Al Gore, in the polar ice caps, that by now they would be gone and that, according to climate change, the planet is heating up. There would be less polar ice. And what he’s saying, well, look, there’s actually more surface area of polar ice, and there’s some satellites that indicate that there’s more ice.

And he also took a segment. If you ever looked at global temperatures, it ticks up and down, up and down. But the trend is going up. So, what he does is he takes a segment of that, and then he does what I call an expansive analysis of just a narrow segment of data points. And so, he then looks at the downward trends within this overall contextual trend. The whole thing’s going up. But say that in this particular segment it goes down, down, down but then goes up. He stops it before it goes up. So, he takes that snapshot of just the downticks and says, “Well, look, there’s a pause. And this has been proven that there’s a pause, that the Earth is actually cooling.”

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Mair: Well, the fact of the matter is that the study [that Cruz referenced] was redone. There was an error in that analysis. And so, the whole argument about climate pause is bogus because if you just step back and look at the overall data set, as they set, look at the whole population of data, of all the data collected over

time, and then just due to mathematical smoothing there was no pause. It is climbing.

So, he took two points—expansion of polar ice, sea ice as well as a small window snapshot to where they found at least a significant pattern down, but only within that narrow statistical window out of all the data collected from the beginning to now. And he made this argument that the Earth is not—that the Sierra Club as well as climate scientists are wrong and that, more importantly, that it is a hysteria that we're trying to drive, and that we're trying to scare the world.

05-06:00:34

Eardley-Pryor: What does this have to do with regulations that you're testifying on?

05-06:00:37

Mair: It has nothing to do with it, and that's the point. That is the point. It had zero, but see, that's what happens when you are in a court. If a prosecutor has broad leeway to take a plaintiff for a ride or a defendant for a ride, and if you're not careful in thinking and listening carefully, you can actually trip yourself up. A lesser person would say, "Oh yeah, I can see your point. It might be"—but you just swore under oath. Your report under oath is that it's going up.

05-06:01:15

Eardley-Pryor: So, what happened? What happened to your testimony?

05-06:01:17

Mair: Nothing happened to my testimony. If you were to read my testimony without video, it's a nothing-burger because I just stand by my point. No, it's ninety-seven percent. [Cruz says,] "You're wrong, and you've got to apologize. Sierra Club must apologize." [I say,] "For what? Ninety-seven percent is ninety-seven percent. But what about ninety-seven percent don't you—." [Cruz say,} "But I've just shown you that the Earth is cooling. It's pausing. And I've just shown you this polar ice cap." [I say,] "What does that have to do with the fact that we have consensus agreement amongst ninety-seven percent of scientists?"

Now, granted, I could have drifted off and said, "Look, you're taking one of the methods of science, the observational method of science, things you observe. But that's still amongst many other things that scientists consider. There are lots of ways in which scientists interact with the environment. There's actual measurements. There's more than just looking at ice. Clearly, you understand the scientific method includes a lot more than just looking at ice. But also, what is the composition of that ice? It could be a whole bunch of things."

05-06:02:29

Mair: But again, it's an argument that goes off into space, and that's what they want you to do, because then they pull you off of your testimony about regulation. So, instead of me talking about a dry cleaner—because by the way, they did

have a person who runs a dry cleaners on the panel, because that was a minority business who was saying that they would be hurt by more regulation. But yet, this guy's gone off the reservation with this whole ninety-seven. But, see, that was the point, to pull the conversation into an area that the hearing was never about.

So, what has happened is, we now learn about the troll farms and the bots. And so, what has happened is the Russian troll farms and the bots have gotten a hold of it. And so, they got that little clip of his theatrics and tossed out the rest of the hearing. Nor does any of those clips cite what the hearing was about. But what you do have is just a sound bite of that segment. And unfortunately, you don't control it. But, the lesson learned for me is never take the bait. I should have never engaged that ninety-seven percent point. That was a mistake.

05-06:03:50

Mair:

What I should have done, said, "Well, listen, sir, I'll have my staff get back with you and provide you with additional documentation on that. But right now I agree with the consensus of the scientists. But if you want to talk about climate pause, I can have my staff go back and get information on climate pause, on why the climate is not pausing or temperatures are not pausing." And that should have been the short answer. But, unfortunately, I gave him enough of a window that he got his dance on.

But the other piece is, my mic is off. My clock is at zero that they had in front of me. So, again, you know the rules going in. But that's the other thing. The community on the outside, people watching, they don't know what the rules are. People are not here, so they don't understand that you're going in there under oath. Speak when spoken to. You have a window. So, they don't get that card. That's not put into the sound bite. So, it looks interesting.

05-06:04:52

Mair:

But, one fact is clear—the testimony stood. If you read the plain text of what he was arguing relative to the testimony, it is sound. It is there. But, it's one of those things that I can't wait until I meet him again. I shall see him again.

05-06:05:11

Eardley-Pryor:

Another climate issue that I think is important to talk about is also in December 2015. The Paris [Climate] Accord is on the table at the international meeting [the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)]. And, what happened? Were you there? What was Sierra Club's role and your role as president within the Paris meeting?

05-06:05:32

Mair:

Well, two things. The Sierra Club role was, not only were we there, but we were there in force. This is one of the times where all the world's leaders are coming to deal with one of the most prescient issues of our time and of our

day. Even the US Chamber of Commerce was there, and I'll remark a little bit more about them in a second.

A couple of things that the Sierra Club did that was present that was very important. One was to not only work to try to get as large a delegation of grassroots activists to be there, to be witnesses, to be activists, to participate, which is really great because we got a lot of the Sierra Club student coalition there, dozens of activists.

But the way the place is set up, there's the main venue where all the action is happening, but there's also what they call this little side venue or village where all the activists are at. So, they've set it up so that the activists and their work and their actions don't cross over, so they won't blend. But you still have the opportunity for international activists to come from around the world to get together, to engage and share information but also to present. And a lot of the demonstrations that came out in the streets were organized in this little pavilion that was there.

05-06:06:44

Mair:

But the Sierra Club's role also, what it did from a movement-building standpoint, it collaborated with the NAACP and HCBUs, which is the Historically Black Colleges and Universities, which is a very significant step. So not only did we work with our student coalition, we cared about the pipeline, making sure future environmental activists and diverse environmental activists of color, we used our big 5,000-pound green gorilla status to push our tent.

So in other words, America looks stronger as activists when we have the diversity of America also present. So, this is one of those tools where, okay, we may not have it, but we help work with and collaborate with others to bring that presence. So when we have our delegation there, this is Sierra Club. But there's all this whole group of Americans—people of color, our youth, our representation. If you were what I call the greater umbrella or diverse umbrella that we brought there, it's a very powerful one. And it made a profound impact.

05-06:07:47

Eardley-Pryor:

How so? In what way for you?

05-06:07:48

Mair:

Number one, not for me but for the world to see that, because you have a lot of [global] North-South groups. No other North-South group—it's just a northern group. Northern NGOs are mainstream. First-world NGOs from England, France, Japan—none of them were bringing their disempowered populations there. They were just happy to be there themselves. They were doing standard branding and standard NGO presence and doing their own swag.

But what we cared about was really bringing the voices of humanity. So, we had Alaskans who were on islands that were disappearing, Puerto Ricans, people who were on US territories that are disappearing, that are solely—that are our front-line communities. So, we brought the front-line impact.

So, when we started, there's something called Article Five in the Paris Protocols that ultimately did not get put in called "Damages and Loss." And this dealt with nations, front-line nations, and peoples. In fact, Tangier Island, sitting right in the Chesapeake Bay, which is disappearing, it brought these front-line people there to tell their stories, to get them there to tell their stories. Get it on the global record. And, it was very important. So, as the policy makers and decision makers were talking about damages and loss, they actually had authentic voices that they could point to or even call on, bring out and bring in.

05-06:09:02

Mair:

And, you had the Climate Action Network that actually had a venue that was constantly doing a CNN-type of scenario. So the people were, as they say, were being broadcast. It was being typed up. All the media channels were disseminating this information. So you would have somebody from Alaska that, at best, maybe they would have a local news affiliate capture their concern and their plight. But here at the COP 21 [the twenty-first session of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)], also known as the 2015 Paris Climate Conference] and at that venue, the whole world was getting that feed. And all of a sudden, global meeting had access to this small community that's facing the worst effects of climate [change].

So when we talk about damages and loss, it's what is the role of First-World nations to make communities at risk, nations at risk, and people at risk whole? They should be setting aside monies and aid to deal with their losses, meaning that they might have to be relocated. They might become climate refugees. You just can't leave it to nothing.

05-06:10:14

Mair:

If it's being caused and led, if climate change is being led by the First World and caused by the First World—by "led," I mean most of the pollution has come from our industrialized past—[then] we have a special burden to step up and to contribute to a pot of money that would help deal with these effects. So, the issue of damages and loss is how do we mitigate these things, and how does the First World step up?

So, the way the US interpreted it is typical, like an insurance company casualty loss. In other words, they try to frame it as the US is paying for the liabilities, of how we're paying for everybody else's problem. Again, the arrogance and the hubris of finding ways to weasel out of our global commitments, and more importantly our global responsibility. We have to

own up. The purpose of this is the global community owning up to its contribution and thereby sharing the weight of this and then trying to help mitigate it. So we tried to shape, as they say, frame and shape that [damages and loss] argument and keep that in the final document. We weren't successful.

05-06:11:23

Mair:

The other one is clean practices, clean work practices and exploitation of women and child labor. Because a lot of these rare earth minerals and all these things that are going into a lot of the clean technology, they're going to go into exploited labor and exploited populations and degrading labor and degraded populations. So, they take advantage of an impoverished nation's state and status, but yet strip it of its natural mineral resources to produce some of these clean technologies, et cetera.

So, the argument there is making sure, going into this, that you're not reducing the dignity of humanity and more importantly that you will uphold certain international labor standards, protect native indigenous rights, et cetera. It's protecting those populations that become vulnerable when First-World nations are negotiating such complex treaties and agreements. So, this was also stripped away [from the final language in the Paris Accord].

05-06:12:20

Mair:

But Sierra Club was one of the lead organizations. And our presence and my voice in advocating—because I was also in the main tent, because we were able to get, I believe, about five of us into the main area at a time. And so, one of the things that I fought for was, we talk about “just transition,” which is basically when we're talking about ending dirty labor or dirty environmental practices, that we've got to get people to clean energy practices and also clean jobs.

And they were giving out something called the Fossil Awards, meaning countries that were doing everything they can to halt progress but still maintain some sort of burning of carbon or fossil fuels, and so you were branded. They had this little dinosaur. You were given a fossil because fossil fuels were burning all kinds of—

05-06:13:14

Eardley-Pryor:

Who was giving away these Fossil Awards?

05-06:13:16

Mair:

Oh, this was the consortium of NGOs there. They were grading daily the progress of nation-states who were basically advocating in good faith. They would praise them. And then the ones that were advocating in bad faith and just doing silly stuff, they were given fossils. And so, you had the winners and losers. And so, they were with or without. Those who were doing it right, you were praised. But countries like India and a few others that wanted to still

burn coal, they were getting—Saudi Arabia—they were getting slammed with fossils, man.

And so, I thought that was a very powerful image and visual. And the global media was using that, because they would dress up as characters, like a showman.

05-06:14:08

Eardley-Pryor: It's good street theater.

05-06:14:09

Mair: It was a beautiful piece of street theater, and it was occurring in the main tent. So what happened was, between all the intense negotiations, global media would then cut to this lighthearted thing that was poking fun at the intellectual dishonesty and the national dishonesty and disgrace of all the nations that were being bad actors and earning fossils. So, I figured that that was a very powerful tool.

I then sat down with labor, because I was working with labor to try to make sure that whatever technologies and things that are being advocated in advance—because the next thing you know, you had to finance the technology and the new wave of producing clean energy. And to do that, there are a lot of businesses and people seeking new market opportunities. They wanted to be on the ground floor.

But my argument is that you must also make sure within that Article Five that you had clean labor practices, meaning that I wanted to also declare that, “Yes, if you produce solar cells or solar panels with exploited labor and degraded labor, that should be also classified as dirty,” okay? I wanted the labor practices to be factored in amongst the dirt as bad and as evil because, again, through degrading humanity, people—if the oil industry is going to give me a job, and you're not, I'm with oil. So, we had to factor those practices in.

05-06:15:37

Mair: So, the positive loop we called “just transition.” This is where you're engaging in—if you're going to shut down a coal plant or a nuclear power plant, if they're going over, they're going to be part of the work teams that are using the new offshore wind rigs, and they're workers who were once riggers and drillers. They're now the offshore riggers and builders of the wind farms. So, we're talking about the one for one, getting these people to jobs that are still jobs with dignity. But they have to respect unions and labor rights and no child labor, et cetera.

So, nations that didn't do that, instead of getting a Just Transition Award, they would get an Unjust Transition Award. And so, we were able then to piggyback on the Fossil [Awards]. And so, we actually had the Unjust Transition Awards. And especially we went after Nissan because it was the

Nissan Leaf plant in Canton, [Mississippi]. And we wanted to bring to the world attention as to the fact that here is a classy example of unjust transition. Because here's a Nissan plant that was partnered with Renault that had, within Japan and within France, some of the best jobs, the best living wages. But yet when they come to United States, they set up on the side of a former plantation where slavery once existed. And they're engaging in a form of slave labor by Blacks who were descendants of slaves now working in a plant on substandard wages and jobs, but producing this product that's being sold globally.

05-06:17:11

Mair:

Again, global capitalism taking advantage of the culture of traditions of racism within United States and inequality, profiting from that in the form of depressed wages and then saying that because they're producing these cars, they should know. That's a dirty labor practice, and that's an unjust transition. And so, in giving them the Unjust Transition Award—because there were a lot of workers and people there from the Nissan plant in France and Japan and the Renault plant in France. They were there taking pride in their clean cars and technologies.

And so, when they learned about the plight of these Black workers in the United States and that their jobs and that their corporation that's paying them was taking advantage of such exploitative labor conditions, they were outraged. And so, we were able to get the workers from these unions to join up with UAW [United Automobile Workers union]. workers and lead this presentation. And this was really powerful because we had Dr. Bob Bullard to talk about racism. So, we had the NAACP on the panel, and we had the UAW.

05-06:18:22

Mair:

And so, here for the first time, what would have been normally a domestic labor dispute between right-to-work and the automotive industry, now it's on the global stage. And when the world saw what was happening—we had pictures of the workers and the conditions—there was outrage. There was absolute outrage. The workers in France did not know. The workers in Japan did not know. And it took this very powerful venue to do that.

And the Sierra Club being in that space, the UAW was saying, "We've always had problems with the environmental movement. We never knew that you would be an ally." We said, "Yes. This is the case where we can come together." And this is the case and space where we built solidarity with the union that often viewed the environmental movement with hostility. But they were game for producing products that would save the planet and that this they can absolutely get behind. And so, we built a huge amount of solidarity in a global space. But we also used the exploitation of race for profit within the domestic United States to shame the United States that allows this practice, but also the plants that create these conditions for these things to exist.

05-06:19:42

Eardley-Pryor: This action that happened at the [2015] Paris [Climate Conference.] Was there a connection to the labor solidarity march that happened in 2017?

05-06:19:49

Mair: Yes, because we had this moment of solidarity built in a foreign country.

05-06:19:56

Eardley-Pryor: In Paris.

05-06:19:56

Mair: In Paris. And I think that it would have been hard for the UAW big-ups to really wrap their minds around it if you just showed up at a plant or what have you. Because there, right now, are unions that are in the moment. They're in the moment at a given plant, and they're dealing with the bread-and-butter issues of the organizing issues of workers right there. So, to try to wrap in the environmental context, I think, would have been very, very difficult.

But what happened in Paris, because you had automobile manufacturers in Paris and everybody is at that table, at that international table, it allowed labor and the UAW to see the power of the environmental movement—but the power of the environmental movement being a powerful labor advocate and protecting workers' rights and jobs with dignity. So, when the UAW saw that, that was a very, very powerful hook for the UAW and Sierra Club solidarity, a very big moment. A piece of history occurred in Paris when you had the UAW saying, "We're down with the Sierra Club."

05-06:21:01

Mair: So, we capitalized that because then they told us about, "Listen, you guys need to come and help us at this plant. You guys, this was great. We like this unjust transition award. This is classic organizing. We can support this. This is something that we want to get behind." And then they asked us for our solidarity to help the workers organizing at the Renault Nissan plant in Mississippi. And we agreed to be there.

But I had a little special thing up my sleeve. I'm the son of a General Motors labor organizer. I wore my father's union coat to the rally. And I preached the fire and brimstone of Big Arnie on environment, environmental justice, jobs with dignity. And I did it with that UAW Local, Tarrytown Local, on my back. So for them to see the Sierra Club president, a guy that normally, through the environmentalists, are going to stop jobs, but now advocating for jobs, advocating for labor, and saying that it is essential for them to have a union in order for them to feed their families and protect the environment, and that these things work hand in hand. Getting them to see the beauty of having clean jobs, and that clean jobs make sure that their kids have a clean environment. This thing came together. And the NAACP then was there as well, because this is that partnership from Paris. So, you have the labor rights,

civil rights, and environmental movement, all of them—so environmental, labor and civil rights coming together. And we did that there.

05-06:22:24

Mair:

We did that in Peoria when we then joined and teamed up, when we went up to Peoria, Illinois to deal with the coal-fired plant. And so, we used that same effort when we went to Flint, Michigan, because this was one of the cradles of the automotive industry and, as they say, declining automobile infrastructure.

But the point of the matter is, you still had an issue of the environment and the pollution. Remember, they made sure that the automotive parts plant got clean water while the residents had still poisoned water. So again, environmental, civil rights, and labor coming together, again, advocating for an impacted—

05-06:23:20

Eardley-Pryor:

Movement building.

05-06:23:22

Mair:

This is classic movement building. So, once you crossed that bridge, and once you lay down the planking where they can see the power of what you're trying to do and that you're not against them, that actually you're actually for conditions that would actually make them healthier and have living wages, that you're an ally. And then all of a sudden they're like, "Listen, how do I become a Sierra Club member?"

And I challenge anybody to this day to look at the number of members in enrollment under my watch prior. And I would say take a year or two after, because there was still a lack of it. Just look at the growth in membership, of our membership, under my watch. I challenge folks to look at that.

[A portion of this interview has been sealed until 2045.]

05-06:32:49

Eardley-Pryor:

Once the [2016 US presidential] election happened, what was the reaction within the Club? Once [Donald] Trump won, I guess my question is, what changed?

05-06:33:01

Mair:

Everything. Everything, because everybody believed still, even if he won, there would be institutional checks. I don't think anybody believed that an executive would go in and decapitate—not decapitate, I would say, because it's literally take off the top half of the body. Literally, he actively went in, for example, the State Department and EPA, he went in to real—in the past you would fire all political appointees. But they went in and went after line civil servants. They went after experts in the EPA. Any scientist who did any study or any work on climate, they went on active purges of line civil servants. Line civil servants were fired left and right, demoted or had their whole bureaus wiped out.

So, nobody expected that. Folks felt that the institutions would serve as guardrails against his worst excesses, as it served with W. Bush. Because W. Bush, when he went in, they still relied upon the career civil servant. Nobody expected the career civil servants to be part of the ideological partisan wave and retaliation and destruction of government. And so, we're at a place and space that we haven't seen since the turn from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century. This is how far back we've gone.

And the damage that has been done institutionally is quite significant. We're seeing attacks on the Antiquities Act. We're seeing attacks on land that was protected by Teddy Roosevelt. Land that was signature flag standard, gold standard environmental protection era, going back to the early twentieth century, we're now seeing up for drilling leases.

05-06:35:06

Eardley-Pryor: How did the Club respond?

05-06:35:09

Mair: Well, the thing right now is the "Resist" movement. And the Club, I think, has been actively properly engaged. But because we already began this movement building—so, let me put it to you this way. A lot of the expanding of our tent to build allies under my watch has now come to serve us well. It's been now our best offensive weapon. Some thought it was a stretch too far, but I think it was a stretch not far enough but a stretch at the right time.

And that effort that I led with regards to building partners with the NAACP, the women's movement, the human rights campaign, all of the diverse players and actors, has actually been a powerful asset that has allowed the Club to be really resilient in this time of threat under Trump. Our partners and our new allies are relying on us, and they're looking to us. And that is one of the powers of really building a diverse and inclusive movement. That is really one of the powers of really digging into that deeper shade of green.

05-06:36:17

Mair: And it's from that resilience that people are looking, and they get it. So, when that whole attack on science came, we were there. And when people were proud, "Where can we get a Sierra Club button?" I would say, at least from my view in the crowd, I think people wanted out Sierra Club buttons just as much as they want some of the pink hats they had on their head. And that's a very cool thing. And I'm proud and I'm sad because I think that we're reduced to this place that we have to fight for everything. But I'm proud of the fact that the Sierra Club is now looked to as one of the line organizations to engage in that fight.

And I'm proud of the fact that the NAACP is expecting the Sierra Club to be there with it. I'm proud that the UAW, in its marches, is expecting that the Sierra Club would be standing shoulder to shoulder with them. You've never seen this relationship before. And it's coming out of this climate movement.

It's coming out of this diversity, equity, inclusion movement. But it's coming out of our core principle of enlisting humanity to save the planet.

05-06:37:28

Mair:

And we have been making a compelling case with regards to the condition of labor, the condition of our democracy, and the condition of civil rights is integral to environmental protection. As we degrade these things, we create people who degrade the environment. And seeing that big picture and tying it together, going back to really being that steward, you just cannot deplete the land.

And so, holistically looking at it, so, for me I'm calling up on those faith traditions and those farmer traditions of Zion McKenzie. I'm calling up on my deep faith, my deep connection to the land. I'm calling up on all those things that Wendell Berry says that here is the core of an environmental. I move beyond the "saves," but looking holistically at my role as a steward within that. And then sharing that in its full, robust form has been, I think, one of those full-circle points and moments of my activism and my stewardship within this movement.

05-06:38:29

Eardley-Pryor: This is great. Thank you so much for all your time today, Aaron.

05-06:38:32

Mair:

Thank you.

05-06:38:33

Eardley-Pryor: It's been a joy.

[End of interview]

Appendix: Documents and images courtesy of Aaron Mair

1865 Will of Col Benjamin Hagood Box:82 No: 869

amt. - Not forward			
1	Boy	Heare (belimo) 16 years	50.00
1	Lot	old iron (in shop)	6.00
1	Set	Blacksmith tools	25.00
1		old anvil + grindstone	8.00
8	Bushels	wish Potatoes 100	8.00
10	"	sweet " 40	4.00
1	Lot	Sticks + staves	10.00
1	Negro man	and wife 40 years + three children 6 years, 4 years + Henry 1 year	1750.00
1	Negro girl	Amanda 25 years widow	850.00
1	"	Charlotte 16 "	885.00
1	"	Louisa 12 "	837.50
1	Boy	Johnson 14 "	856.00
1	girl	Mary 10 "	681.00
1	"	Fanny 8 " widow	625.00
1	Negro man	Dave 42 (unbound)	300.00
1	"	Wmou Pally 42	300.00
1	Boy	Perry 15	737.50
1	Man	Berry 45 (unbound) + wife Caroline 33 + 3 children	1100.00
1	Child	Nancy 3 months	925.00
1	Negro Boy	Zion 16 years	781.00
1	"	Warren 18 "	362.50
1	girl	Lane (abandoned at 5 years)	475.00
1	Boy	Amos (unbound) 9 "	485.00
1	"	Laurens 7 "	382.00
1	"	Berry 5 " Berry Jr.	287.50
1	girl	Daisy 3 "	912.50
1	Man	Nick 38 "	1050.00
1	Boy	Carlin 25 "	1075.00
1	"	Bob 22 "	1081.00
1	"	Peter 29 " widow	906.00
1	"	Robert 16 "	

The will of Col. Benjamin Hagood showing Aaron Mair's ancestors, including Zion McKenzie, as the enslaved property of the Hagood family in South Carolina, circa 1865.

Page No. 10; Inquiries numbered 7, 16, and 17 are not to be asked in respect to infants. Inquiries numbered 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 19, and 20 are to be answered (if at all) merely by an affirmative mark, as /.

SCHEDULE I.—Inhabitants in Pumpkintown Township, in the County of Pickens, State of S. Carolina, enumerated by me on the 25 day of August, 1870.

Post Office: Pickensville S.C. C. W. Folger, Ass't Marshal.

1	2	3	4			7	8		10	11		13	15		17	18	20	
			4	5	6		8	9		11	12		15	16			19	20
Inhabitants enumerated in this order of visitation.		The name of every person whose place of abode on the first day of June, 1870, was in this family.	DESCRIPTION.			Profession, Occupation, or Trade of each person, male or female.	VALUE OF REAL ESTATE OWNED.		Place of Birth, naming State or Territory of U. S., or the Country, if of foreign birth.	PARENTAGE.		Whether dead and dumb, blind, insane, or idiotic.	EDUCATION.		Whether dead and dumb, blind, insane, or idiotic.	CONSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS.		
Female inmates, enumerated in the order of visitation.			Age at last birthday.	Sex.	Color.		Value of Real Estate.	Value of Personal Estate.		Father of foreign birth.	Mother of foreign birth.		Attended school within the year.	Can read.		Can write.	Male, Citizens of U. S. of 21 years of age and up.	Male Citizens of U. S. of 21 years of age and up, who are not otherwise enumerated in the other papers filed in the office of the Registrar.
1		Reith Ann	26	F	W	Keeping House												
2		William A	24	M	W													
3		William S	24	M	W													
4		Robert	24	M	W													
5		John Jane	26	F	B													
6	75	Reith James B	24	M	B	Farmer	9000											
7		Julia	19	F	W	Keeping House												
8		Edgabeth	1	F	W													
9	76	Conan Keuben	24	M	B	Farmer												
10		Rose	40	F	B	Keeping House												
11		Riccy	4	F	B													
12		Thomas	5	M	B													
13		Roosnak	1	F	B													
14		Son	25	F	W	Without												
15	77	Clayton Samuel	24	M	B	Keeping House												
16	78	William Berry	40	M	W	Farmer	9000											
17		Caroline	22	F	W	Keeping House												
18		Gene	19	M	W	Farm Laborer												
19		Warren	17	M	W	"												
20		Jane	16	F	W	"												
21		Amos	13	M	W	"												
22		Laurance	10	M	W	"												
23		Berry	8	M	W	"												
24		Riccy	7	F	W	"												
25		Anney	5	F	W	"												
26		Albert	3	M	W	"												
27		George	1	M	W	"												
28	79	Williams James	34	M	W	Farmer												
29		Hanna	29	F	B	Keeping House												
30		Eliza	6	F	W													
31		Mary	2	F	W													
32	80	Marlin Philip B	44	M	W	Farmer	30000											
33		Elvina	36	F	W	Keeping House												
34		James	4	M	W													
35		Edgabeth	8	F	W													
36		James	23	M	W													
37	81	Miles Maria	26	F	B													
38		Mary	7	F	B													
39		Gilbert	4	M	B													
40		Laurry	1	F	W													

U.S. Census of 1870 for Pumpkintown Township in Pickens County, South Carolina, showing the McKenzie family (Aaron Mair's ancestors) as free citizens, August 1870.

Habeas Corpus. Pack 156. No. 2. Martha Jane Edens, wife of **Samuel Edens** being sworn saith that on Tuesday the 18 day of June last, that her husband **Samuel Edens** went to cutting wheat near his house soon after breakfast that he remained in his wheat hatch with his brother **Absolem B. Edens** until a shower of rain came up which was as she supposes about 11:30. That as soon as the rain came up **Samuel and Absolem Edens** came to the house to dinner about which was about 12 o'clock, that as soon as the shower of rain was over which was about one o'clock or half past one they went to work in **Samuel Edens** cotton & potato patch. That they worked in the patch until night, that the said patch was in front of the house, below the road and in full view of the house and that she often times saw them in the patch in the evening at work and that at no time during the evening of the 18th of June the said **Samuel Edens** could not have gone to **Mrs. Ropers** where **Mr. Mitchell** was shot without her knowledge. That **Mrs. Abbie Roper** lives a little over 3 miles from their house, never heard of **Mr. Mitchell** being shot until the evening of the 19th June, does not recollect who told her. Sworn to 19 Oct 1872. . . . On 19 Oct 1872 **Sarah Ann Terrell** made oath that on Tuesday June 18th, she was working on the plantation of **Samuel Edens** and remained in the bottom until about 11 o'clock when a shower of rain came up, and she went to the house with her mother, and as she was going to the house out of the rain, **Samuel & Absolem Edens** was cutting and tying wheat in **Samuel Edens** wheat field near his house. That as soon as the rain was over and she got thru dinner, she returned to the bottom to work and she saw the **Saml. & Absolem Edens** at work in the cotton and potato patch, which was in full view of where she was working and that **Samuel Edens** could not have gone to **Mrs. Abbie Ropers** house a distance of 3½ miles with seeing him going or returning. Heard that **Mr. Mitchell** was shot the next evening thru **Harrison Rigdon**. . . . **Adaline Terrell** made oath that on June 18 last she was plowing the bottom of said **Samuel Edens** until the rain came up. She went to the house and saw them cutting and tying wheat. . . . **Mr. Zion McKenzie** said that on June 18 as he was going to plowing after dinner in the bottom of **Samuel Edens** he saw them at work. **Samuel** asked for a Writ of Habeas Corpus.

Writ of Habeas Corpus showing Aaron Mair's great-great grandfather Zion McKenzie testifying in a court case that absolved a murder accusation against two white brothers: Samuel Edens and Absolem Edens. Zion McKenzie later married Mary Edens, the younger sister of Samuel and Absolem, circa 1870s (Writ of Habeas Corpus, Pack 156, No. 2 in Miscellaneous Pickens County South Carolina Records, re-printed in the *Old Pendleton District Newsletter* Vol. 1, No. 4, April 2007).

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SCHEDULE 1 - Free Inhabitants in the Regmt Co. Ga. Ma. in the County of Pickens State of South Carolina enumerated by me, on the 26th day of June 1860. D. C. Robins Ass't Marshal
 Post Office Pumpkintown 121

1	2	3	4			7	8		10	11	12	13	14
			Age	Sex	Color		Value of Real Estate	Value of Personal Estate					
		James W. Southland	8	m	"				Pickens S.C.				
		John D. "	2	m	"				"				
		Blanca "	7	f	"				"				
228	228	John S. Popper	58	m	"	Farmer & B.P.	2500	2800	South Carolina				
		Malina "	55	f	"				Pickens S.C.				
		Rachel G. Hendricks	31	f	"		1500	50	"				
		Elizabeth Popper	20	m	"				"				
		Ann M. "	17	f	"				"				
		Ann "	15	m	"				"				
		Mary D. "	13	f	"				"				
		Rachel M. "	7	f	"				"				
		Benjamin S. Hendricks	12	m	"				"				
		Whiffin "	7	m	"				"				
		Warren "	5	m	"				"				
224	224	William S. Edens	53	m	"			100	"				
		Elizabeth "	23	f	"				"				
		Mary M. "	4	f	"				"				
		Nathaniel P. "	2	m	"				"				
225	225	Alexander Edens	51	m	"		1000	1500	"				
		Margaret "	38	f	"				"				
		Samuel "	17	m	"				"				
		Allen H. "	15	m	"				"				
		Absolom B. "	13	m	"				"				
		James M. "	11	m	"				"				
		Rebecca "	10	f	"				"				
		Napoleon P. "	8	m	"				"				
		Mary J. "	6	f	"				"				
		William E. "	3	m	"				"				
		Alexander G. "	1	m	"				"				
226	226	William Edens	59	m	"		800	800	"				
		Mary "	56	f	"				"				
		Sarah A. "	18	f	"				"				
		Erskine B. "	16	f	"				"				
		Samuel "	14	m	"				"				
227	227	James Keith	75	m	"		2000	2000	North Carolina				1
		Elizabeth "	60	f	"				"				1
		Sarah Burgess	45	f	"		1000	500	Pickens S.C.				
		Mary "	16	f	"				"				
228	228	Sarah Southland	65	f	"		5000	1500	"				1
		John Southland	6	m	"				"				

No. white males, 22 No. colored males, _____ No. foreign born, _____ No. blind, _____
 No. white females, 18 No. colored females, _____ No. deaf and dumb, _____ No. insane, _____
 Total value of real estate, 30,700 Total value of personal estate, 42,600 No. idiotic, _____
 No. paupers, _____ No. convicts, _____

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U.S. Census of 1860 for Pumpkintown Township in Pickens County, South Carolina, showing members of the Edens family as free, white citizens, including the brothers Samuel and Absolom Edens and younger sister Mary Edens, June 1860. Mary Edens became Aaron Mair's great-great grandmother after marrying Zion McKenzie.

No. 287 McKenzie COUNTY, S. C., Oct 31 1882

Received from Zion McKenzie

for Taxes due on the following described property, for the fiscal year 1882, viz: 287 Dollars.

<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">TAX RECEIPT.</p>	<p>Lois, Value, \$.....</p> <p>Acres, ".....</p> <p>Building, ".....</p> <p>Personal Property, <u>64</u></p> <p>TOTAL, \$ <u>64</u></p>	<p>[See Recd. "Notice" on back of this Receipt before having County Treasurer's Office]</p>	<p>State Tax, - - - - - \$..... <u>3.04</u></p> <p>15 per cent. penalty on State Tax, - - - - -</p> <p>5 " " " " - - - - -</p> <p>Ordinary County Tax, - - - - - <u>2.57</u></p> <p> <u>10.00</u> Tax, - - - - - <u>5.13</u></p> <p>School Tax, - - - - - <u>12.50</u></p> <p>15 per cent. penalty on all County Tax - - - - -</p> <p>5 " " " " - - - - - <u>11.75</u></p> <p>Poll Tax, - - - - - <u>1.00</u></p> <p>County Treasurer's Costs, - - - - -</p> <p>TOTAL TAX, - - - - - \$..... <u>2.257</u></p>
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J. P. [Signature]
County Treasurer.

Tax receipt of Zion McKenzie showing South Carolina poll tax of \$1,000 in fiscal year 1882.



Zion McKenzie, the great-great maternal grandfather of Aaron Mair, who described Zion as similar to the biblical Moses for bringing his family from enslavement at the Hagood Mill in Pickens County, South Carolina, through emancipation to ownership of land that remains in Mair's family today (photographed circa 1910).



Isaac Talley and Zion McKenzie
Aaron Mair's great-great maternal uncle and his great-great maternal grandfather
(photographed circa 1910).



Arnold George Mair, Sr., paternal grandfather of Aaron Mair, who emigrated from Jamaica to New York (photographed circa 1960s).



Aaron Mair's relatives in The Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, New York, circa 1947.

Pictured clockwise from front left: Aunt Wilma (nee McKenzie) and Uncle Richard Jackson; Cousin Daisy Taylor and Daisy's date George Futrell; Margaret Mair (mother of Aaron Mair); Uncle Cleo and Aunt Alma (nee McKenzie) McKinney.

(Photograph taken by Aaron Mair's father, Arnold George Mair, Jr.)



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Arnold George Mair, Jr. (right), father of Aaron Mair, pictured with a friend, August 1959.



Arnold George Mair, Jr., father of Aaron Mair, on General Motors assembly line, circa 1970s.



Aaron Mair pictured in newspaper celebrating the closure of the ANSWERS incinerator, 1994.



Aaron Mair working at Ground Zero of the World Trade Center disaster area as an emergency responder in conjunction with the New York State Department of Health, New York State Emergency Management Office, New York City Office of Emergency Management, and Federal Emergency Management Administration, September 2001.

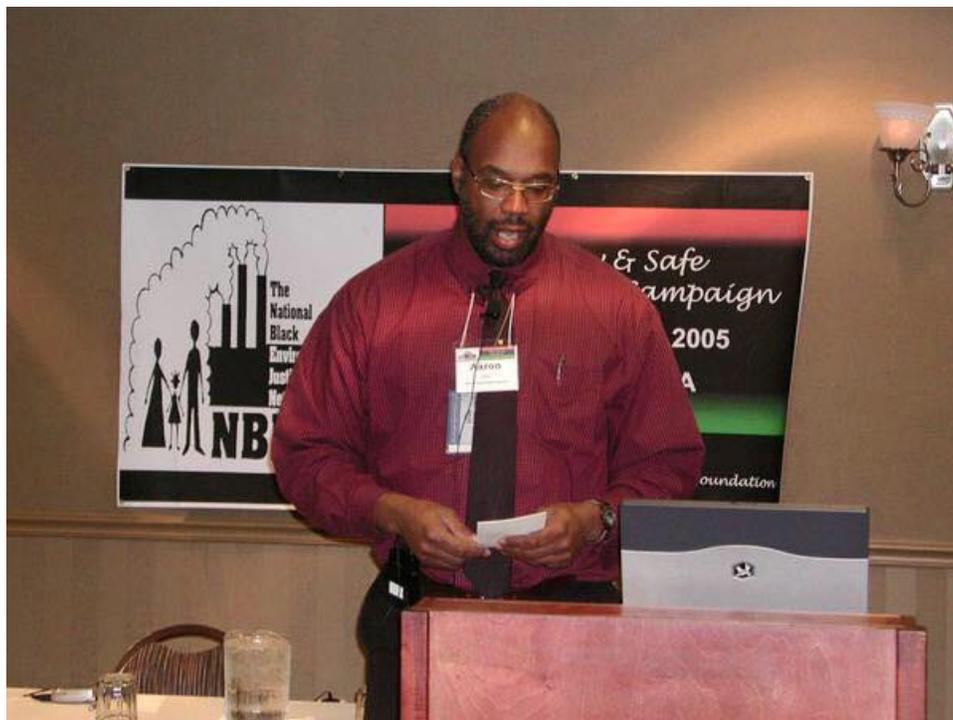


Aaron Mair and Roger Grey with poster for the Arbor Hill Environmental Justice Fund.

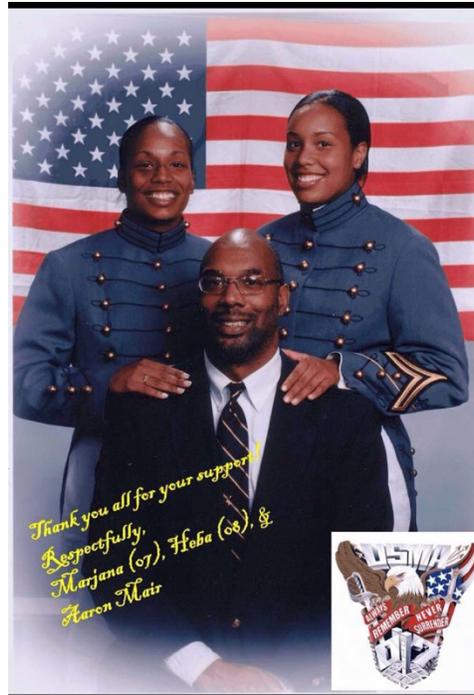
Roger Grey encouraged the Sierra Club's Hudson Mohawk Group to establish this fund after the Sierra Club's Atlantic Chapter rejected Mair's appeals in the early 1990s to support his campaign against the ANSWERS (Albany New York Solid Waste to Energy Recovery System) solid waste incinerator in Albany, New York. Mair promised Grey he would become a member of the Sierra Club if they successfully closed the ANSWERS facility. Mair kept that promise in 1999 (pictured here circa 2015).



Aaron Mair (in red shirt and hat) speaking as the founder and board president of Arbor Hill Environmental Justice Corporation during the Clean Up the Hudson River campaign, which resulted in a settlement between the EPA and General Electric to dredge toxic PCB sediments from the Upper Hudson River (pictured circa 2000).



Aaron Mair speaking to the National Black Environmental Justice Network in 2005.



Aaron Mair (center) with daughters Heba (left) and Marjana (right), (pictured circa 2007).



Aaron Mair (front row, far right) with members in the Sierra Club Environmental Justice Program (pictured circa 2010).



Marching for Climate Justice in New Orleans on the 10th Anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. Pictured left to right: a member of the Indigenous Environmental Network; Alison Chin, former president of the Sierra Club; Bill McKibben, co-founder of climate campaign group 350.org; Aaron Mair, then president of the Sierra Club in 2015.



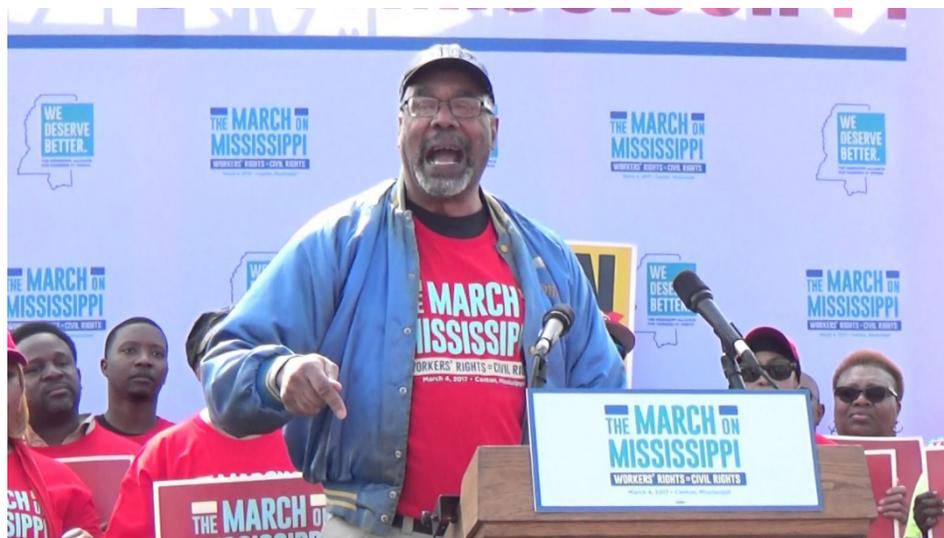
Cornell William Brooks, president of the NAACP (front left), and Aaron Mair, president of the Sierra Club (front center), marching for Voter and Environmental Justice in 2016.



U.S. President Barack Obama greets Sierra Club president Aaron Mair at Yosemite National Park to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the National Parks System on June 18, 2016.



Aaron Mair at Field of Dreams Inc. park, which he helped reclaim in the wake of drug violence and secured funding to build recreational facilities for children in his majority Black neighborhood (pictured circa 2015).



Aaron Mair wearing his father's old union-organizing jacket while speaking during The March on Mississippi on behalf of union organizers at the Nissan manufacturing plant (July 2017).



Daughters of Aaron Mair, left to right: Olivia, Maryam, Heba, and Marjana (pictured circa 2017).



Aaron Mair at the Helderberg Escarpment just outside of Albany overlooking the Hudson River Valley in New York State. Around 1850, Joseph LeConte studied geology with Louis Agassiz at the Helderberg Escarpment and nurtured theories of scientific racism. In 1869, LeConte joined the faculty of the University of California, Berkeley, and in 1892 he co-founded the Sierra Club with John Muir and others (November 2018).



Aaron Mair at the site of the former ANSWERS (Albany New York Solid Waste to Energy Recovery System) solid waste incinerator that was poisoning Mair's majority-Black neighborhood of Arbor Hill in Albany, New York. In 1998, after his decade-long campaign to shut down the ANSWERS facility in 1994, Mair won a \$1.4 million federal Resource Conservation and Recovery Act settlement with New York State, which he used to create two nonprofit community service organizations: Arbor Hill Environmental Justice Corporation, and the W. Haywood Burns Environmental Education Center. The former ANSWERS site is now a gas-fired power plant (November 2018).