DERAY MCKESSON INTERVIEW
OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION
KUNHARDT FILMS FOUNDATION

DeRay McKesson
Activist
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Interviewed by Teddy Kunhardt
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START TC: 01:00:00:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

DeRay Mckesson interview, take one, marker. Second six.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

DeRay McKesson

Activist

Growing up in Baltimore

01:00:12:14

DERAY MCKESSON:

Baltimore is a good place, a city that's struggled for a long time. So, I was raised by my father, my mother left when I was three. Both my parents were addicted to drugs. My father raised us. And we moved out of the city when I was eleven, so, elementary school in the city. House burned down. We were in fourth grade, lived with our grandmother for a year, moved back into that house, and then moved to the county for sixth through twelfth grade, and at the same time I became a youth organizer in the city. So we sort of split our time, we were in the city with my grandmother during the weekends and then during the week we were in the county for school.

Youth organizing

01:00:52:14

DERAY MCKESSON:

I spent my like childhood or like those teenage years, youth organizing in the city, working to help young people and adults figure out how to work together. And then, student government was like my life. So, from sixth grade to senior year in college, I was always in student government and Baltimore was like the first place that I understood the power of community organizing, the first place that I understood what inequity looked like. I was aware that Obama was a community organizer and that he was running for president, but before that obviously, I had no clue. I was like, "who is this guy?" You know, in Baltimore I did a lot of things in organizing so, one, I used to chair the only youth-led grant-making organization in the city. So, there's this group called Youth is Resources, it's this organization, twenty young people and ten adults. There's a youth chair and we decided how much money got spent from the organization to fund youth-led grant-making projects across the city.

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So, I did that for a couple of years when I was in high school and that was incredible because it'd be young people who would write in and they would put together grant proposals like one thousand, two thousand, three thousand dollars. We would meet as a committee, as a board, and decide how that got allocated. So, it – very quickly – we had a sense of what was happening in the city, we could go out and recruit kids who had good ideas but just needed some money, and we funded a lot of things over those years. So, that was really powerful. I also worked for Baltimore's Safe and Sound campaign as a youth organizer and we did a lot of training. So, we'd go into

communities and help people figure out how to work together, help adults figure out how not to be adultist and like, we would help adults figure out how to not prejudge young people and think about solutions and things like that. And then student government was like the third thing that I did that was really focused on how do we empower young people in different ways.

Hearing Obama speak at the 2004 DNC

01:02:35:22

DERAY MCKESSON:

I remember being in college and I remember I went to college with one of the people who started like students for Obama. Meredith? Do you know Meredith? Did you guys interview Meredith? So, I went to college with one of the people who was like one of the initial students for Obama people. And I remember her more than I remember him. Like, I remember somebody on campus. Bowdoin's small and she was so pumped about this random guy I'd never heard of before. And there were a set of Bowdoin kids who were very into Obama way before there was an Obama-craze. So, that's actually what I remember about him more than anything and then, you know, it's funny, the thing that I think about the most of the campaign is – there are two things – one is the emails. It was like, if I get another email from this guy I'm going to lose my mind, it was like so many emails, and then when Oprah endorsed him. Are like the things that I like, definitively remember from the campaign.

Early impressions of Obama

01:03:28:16

DERAY MCKESSON:

In the beginning, though, it didn't feel like it was real. It felt like America was

gonna do an okey-doke, right? Like, they were gonna dangle this Black guy out, be like, this is what could possibly happen and then yank it away. So, I wasn't too hyped in the beginning because I had seen that promise and that dangle and that okey-doke happen before. So, it was like the Oprah-- the Oprah endorsement was when I was like maybe this is real, maybe this is like people rallying around this guy in a way that makes sense. And, you know, because I was in Maine at the time, it also wasn't – I don't know if you spend a lot of time in Maine, but not a lot of Black people in Maine, so it wasn't like a groundswell of people like coming out around me around Obama because, like, it was Maine.

Obama's inauguration

01:04:13:00

DERAY MCKESSON:

The inauguration, I was at home. I was hopeful. It was one of those things where you're like, wow, this actually happened. I remember it being surreal and, again, when I think about the definitive memory from that, I remember Beyonce singing, that was – you're like, Beyonce cried at the inauguration. And all the different balls. One of my best friends worked on the campaign so I remember him being really proud. There were some people I went to college with who were really involved early and they were really proud. But it was this-- it was so much hope, you know? It was like anything felt possible in that moment and seeing like the huge crowd and the mall, just so much joy – and Blackness – like it was cool that they were so Black, right? It was like, Michelle's Black, he's Black, Beyonce's singing – you know? Just like all the celebrities came out. Like, people really rallied around him and that was something that was really, really powerful. And all the kids, you know,

like, all the kids who were out there, like, babies. People who brought their whole families out to celebrate the inauguration, it was really cool.

Trayvon Martin

01:05:13:15

DERAY MCKESSON:

I remember hearing it at night because I remember putting up a facebook post about being an uncle and like what my–– my sister just had a kid and what if Trayvon was Isaac, who is my nephew and I remember that. And I remember more vividly though, watching the trial unfold. Like, I remember being at work and like watching–– sneaking away to turn on the case and to see his best friend testify and to see the person he was on the phone with, like those sort of things are the things I remember the most, but it was a sobering moment of like, he definitely got murdered, we know this is wrong, he definitely didn't do anything, no matter what he did he should be alive. And like, it doesn't look like there's gonna be any justice, you know?

Michael Brown

01:06:01:21

DERAY MCKESSON:

I remember going to Minneapolis because it was this idea that like if I believe in a commitment to kids, then I can follow that commitment anywhere. And, when Mike Brown got killed, it was this thing about like – I can't say that I fight for kids and like do nothing, right? That like he's a teenager. He got killed. I don't know what I'm going to do, but I'm going to try and do something. So, I was a Teach For America Alum and Teacher For America had actually just come into town to do like a… something. I was, like, on a panel. TFA had a bus and they were like, we're gonna go–– there

was like a memorial. There was like a moment of silence. Feminista Jones had organized -- she's on Twitter – she had organized a moment of silence all around the country around Mike Brown and other victims of police violence.

01:06:42:08

DERAY MCKESSON:

So, we all get on a bus and we like go – and I'll never forget, we show up to this like random community center – random to me – and we're like crowded. It's like a hundred, hundred fifty people, around a conference phone. And I'm like cutting ribbons, so we can put them on people's arms. And that was like the very first thing I'd ever done about the death of Mike Brown. And then, right after that, I went across the street, and stood in front of the police department with a sign and that later became the police department that protests in Minneapolis shut down when someone was killed – when a young Black man was killed in Minneapolis. And then the next weekend on the sixteenth, I was sitting on my couch, it was 1 AM, and I saw what was happening on Twitter and I saw what was happening on CNN. On CNN, it looked like the protestors were wild. It looked like chaos, like a rampage happened to the city and like how could Black people do this. But on Twitter, it looked like the police were wild. And I was like, I think I believe the people on Twitter a little bit more, but at the very least, there was this call to action, like, if you can come, come. And, like, Tef Poe was one of the people who tweeted, if anybody has resources or time, come. So, I was like, I think I'm gonna go, but I remember being like, you know, I can't just drive across the country and not tell anybody. So, I was like, I'm gonna call somebody. And I couldn't call my dad because my father's like very risk-averse so he would be like, don't go. My sister would be fifty-fifty, but my best friend Donny – I think he might just be like, go. So, he had just gotten

married and there was thing where I couldn't call in the middle of the night anymore because you have a wife now. So, I wait til like 7:30 and I call and I'm like, "Hey Donny, I think I'm gonna go to Ferguson, what do you think?" And he's like, "If you think you should go, you should go." And I already had a bag packed and I get in the car, drive nine hours, end up in St. Louis.

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Yeah, so it was a nine-hour drive. So, that was a – I'll never forget those long nine hours. I got a little sleepy, I pulled over in Iowa and slept in front of a church. It was the middle of the night. I got some clothes out of my trunk, used them as a pillow and a blanket, went to sleep, woke back up. I put up a Facebook status saying, "I'm going to St. Louis, can somebody… Does anybody know somebody I can stay with?" Jessica Cordova-Kramer, who eventually became the Executive Producer of A Pod Save the People, who I'd known randomly through Teach for America – she was like, I think I know somebody in St. Louis, Brittany Packnett. So, she loops Brittany in, Brittany–– Brittany's so–– Brittany and I are very close now, but then it was funny because Brittany didn't realize we were the same age, so she was like very maternal in a really sweet way. So she found somewhere for me to sleep. So, I slept at the house of two of her friends for the first two nights and then there was a Bowdoin alum, Ivy Blackmore, who – incredible – she, I think saw on facebook that I was there, and then I stayed at her place for the next month or so. But, the first night I was in St. Louis, it rained. And there weren't really a lot of protests happening that night, but I went out to the main street, west fourth, that we were on… and we were out there but it was raining there were people out there but it wasn't really a protest like the protest sort of became.

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And then, the next morning, I stood in the street with the sign, and then, you know, a lot of people were outside. But that next night was the first night of the curfew. And a lot of people don't remember that what made St. Louis and what still makes St. Louis unique in the span of protests in not only the length, but there was a no-fly zone declared over St. Louis almost immediately. So, of all the cities in protest, there is no aerial footage of the protests in St. Louis, so in Baltimore – people think about aerial footage, aerial footage of protests, Baltimore is normally the city that they think of because Baltimore is the first city where there's–– where there were massive protests during the day like that. And they had aerial footage, there was aerial footage in Baltimore. But in St. Louis, there was not.

01:10:27:03

DERAY MCKESSON:

There was a curfew declared at midnight. So, we're outside and we're like, okay, there's gonna be a curfew. And like the whole point is to like press the curfew, right? Like, we're gonna–– we know we're not leaving at midnight, but we're gonna press and press. But at like, 8:30, they're like, "you gotta get out of the street." And we're like, "I thought the curfew is at midnight," and all of sudden you just see these fire trucks and stuff shooting tear gas, and it's like they had–– the streets aren't blocked off, so it's like chaos. I will never forget the tear gas canister falls by me, there's a little kid who's screaming, I'd never been tear-gassed before, so I don't know what's – I don't know if this is gonna burn, I don't know if I can't breathe, like, that was sort of a wild sensation. There are people with babies, people with cars… you're trying to, like, run but not get run over by a car. You're trying not to get hit by a canister 'cause they're hot. And that was like the – it was that moment that I was like, I'll do whatever I can to make sure nobody experiences this. I get separated from the people I know. I'm in a group of

four high school boys. Like, we're all stuck together and we're like, running away, we hop people's fences, we, like, end up together. And it was almost too – like, as a former teacher – I'm like, these are definitely children, these are, like, teenagers, like, sixteen-year-old, seventeen year old… And, I'll never forget, it was like this moment out of a movie, like, we finally get to a point where we are not by the police and this kid is like, "Can I use your cell phone to call my mom?" I'm on one percent, I don't know where I am. I haven't been in this neighborhood before. He calls his mom, my phone dies, I'm like, "Well, here we go!" …. and that night, one of the side streets was one of the streets that I was just going down because I didn't know… like I knew where the police were and we were just trying to run away from the police. So, I got on the side street, and there's a church that is open, so I, like – there's a pastor outside, he's, "What are you looking for?" I'm like, "Yeah, I don't know where to go," and I have my charger with me and I sit in that church. That guy, like… there were a lot of people hanging out in the church 'cause we were all running from the police. And I sat in that church, met a lot of people that I'm still close to today. I charged my phone and then… the rest is sort of history. It's like I call my boss and I'm like, "I'm gonna stay for a couple days," and then it was like, I'm gonna stay for a couple more days, and then it was like, I think I'm gonna quit. Yeah.

01:12:47:01

Yeah, tear gas is naturally odorless and colorless, so they add what looks like smoke. And that's important because the smoke will eventually dissipate, but the tear gas won't. So, there were some nights later where they would shoot so much tear gas that the smokiness would go away but the tear gas was just so thick in the air that you'd be just walking down the street and you're like, "Oh, there's still tear gas here." And the best way that I can think about it is like, the first thing is that it sticks to everything, it's like, your

clothes, it sticks to your skin… It's like, so, washing it off is like an ordeal. It almost feels like – imagine, like, menthol, like the peppermint tea – like imagine that everywhere. And it doesn't hurt until you move, right? And then you move and, like, the wind hits it and it's sort of like a stinging – like, that's the best way I can sort of explain what it felt like. The firetrucks and police cars are shooting tear gas. The SWAT cars that night were chasing people. So, like, we – it's like surreal even recounting it but, like, they're hanging off the side of the SWAT cars with their guns and they're chasing us down these streets. So, I jump in my car, hide under the steering wheel, they have flashlights, they're like shining flashlights in the car, you're like, "What did you – what is going on?" So, that was sort of wild. But that happened really quick. The Humvees, all that stuff, they were out early, you know? The national guard came much later with, like, more intense Humvees. But the Humvees that they had in St. Louis County were out pretty quick.

Ferguson as a no-fly zone

01:14:21:09

DERAY MCKESSON:

It's like when I think about all the things that really mattered in the beginning, it's like Missouri understood really quickly that if they showed groups of Black people and white people standing in the street, they would lose public sentiment. That if they showed the sheer scale of how many people were outside, that this would not be in their favor. Which is why if you look at the early news reports, it looked like a horde of young people, a gang of Black people. They made it seem like it was 15 people outside. It was thousands of people in the street. And they just got it--it's important to me to note that the no-fly zone was immediate, because they got it immediate--like they understood what was at stake immediately, you know? And it was

us using platforms like Twitter to like show the scale that helped everybody realize that this was like a real thing. But yeah, Missouri was really--they were in on it, you know?

A democratized movement

01:15:15:23

DERAY MCKESSON:

One of the most incredible things about what happened in St. Louis County and Ferguson was that there were a set of people who definitely helped, sort of like, maneuver some of the actions and getting people out of jail and telling the story in big ways, but by and large, there wasn't like a committee, there wasn't like one, two or three people who founded it who were in charge. It was a really democratized space, so like, if you found a niche that needed to happen, then you did it. So, in the early days, there were a set of people, like, they were called "The Peacekeepers" and they, like, helped direct traffic. There was the "New Black Panthers," they also helped keep order in the street in those early, early days when it was really chaotic. Then there was like a bail fund that emerged. There were people like me, I had a really big platform and I helped tell people where to go and how to get there. And there were people like Netta who she organized supplies in the early, early – at one of the gas pumps… if you had supplies you brought it to where she was and she helped distribute them. And Brittney Packnett is a great example. They closed schools, so, Brittney was an educator so she got the library to open up and parents could drop their kids off because they had to go work and she provided enriching education opportunities for all these kids whose school got canceled for… it was like this really cool network of people who didn't all have to sit in a room and decide on what to do, but there was so much need that people sort of figured it out. And that

just grew and grew and grew. But there wasn't any sort of mythical council or mythical sort of small group of people who were deciding. And eventually there became something called the action council that still exists in a different form today where people did sit down and plan out some of the more intense things that we did later on. But, by and large, it was a really beautifully democratized space.

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You know, in hindsight, I think that we were all a little fearful, but I think that what we realized is that like we were afraid when we were silent, too, right? So, we'll take the fear on this end of it. Like, if we're gonna be – if there's a bet to make that if like we don't know everything, but if one thing is true, it's that Mike Brown should be alive today. Like, we don't know what happened, we don't know hands where, we don't know who said what, but whatever happened, he should be here, right. And that was this truth that we just carried with us every single day, and that fueled us. And the police were so intense that – they were so intense that that kept us really laser-focused and, you know, we didn't all love each other, like we are still not all best friends but in the middle of the crisis, everybody figured out how to work together, you know? And it was really, like… I wish that we – you know, none of us knew that the protests were gonna last as long as they did, right? Like, who would've thought that we were gonna stay in the street for four hundred days. Who would've thought we would've been in the street for longer than the Montgomery bus boycott. Like, we didn't know. And I say that because I wish that we had thought about different ways to document like the beautiful way the community emerged. And what's crazy is – or what's important about it is that it wasn't people who had been to organizing trainings, it wasn't people who these people who had read all this theory about community change – you know, it was like, it was such a

beautiful reminder that people know how to organize already and given the opportunity, they will. So, like I think about, in the early days, we were out all day long, hungry. There's these two women who brought out their grill and they would make you food to order right there off the street where the protests were. So, if you wanted a hamburger or hotdog… there were people who, like, weren't in St. Louis who didn't know what to do, so they ordered pizza at an intersection. Like, you would call and order, like, fifteen pizzas at an intersection, that was wild. People would just drop off cases of water. The apartment complexes where Mike Brown got killed, there were a lot of women who had kids or were pregnant and they couldn't take the bus or go out anymore because the main street was blocked off. And people, early, like – in the early, early days somebody puts a folding table outside, and people just like start putting baby supplies on it. Nobody's monitoring it, people are, like, dropping off diapers, dropping off baby formula. Like, people just knew how to organize. And they didn't need some lecture from some master organizer. And, you know, people came down to St. Louis and tried to teach us what to do… And I'll never forget, we go to this one room – we go to this one meeting. All the people who had planned a lot of things and stuff, we had all been in this room in the church – there's like twenty of us, thirty of us – we were in this room and there's this protest leader from another city's coming to, like, teach us and we're like, "Okay, let's… we're willing to take any piece of advice because we have no clue what's going on." And the person leads us through this, like, power mapping exercise, and we were like, we know who got the power. Not us–– like we know. The last thing we need to do is put it on a chart of what's happening. We know exactly what is happening, we need to figure out how to get out of this. And it was such a powerful moment for all of us in the room because we were like, the answer is not coming from outside of this room, that the answer's actually already in

this room and we had to figure it out. And that is truly, I think, the beauty of what happened in St. Louis.

Fighting the 'five second rule' in court

01:20:28:18

DERAY MCKESSON:

So, the five-second rule, it was a–– it was illegal to stand still in August, September and October of 2014 in St Louis county. So, if you sit still for more than five seconds, you got arrested. So, there would be people who would get on their knees and protest, immediately arrested. There would be people who would like stand still – it was nuts. And I was one of the plaintiffs in the court case that got the five-second-rule deemed unconstitutional because my tweet about it was the first public occurrence of it being acknowledged, so, I was like, standing on the corner right at the edge of West Florrisant and these–– a set of three or four officers walk up to me and they're like, "No, you know, you can't stay here – you can't stand still, you can't pace and you can't walk somewhere and come right back." And I was like, is that new? And they were like, this is the rule. So, I immediately tweeted it and later when the ACLU went to file a lawsuit, a law firm called me that they had partnered with because that tweet was like the first time – it was like the marker of when the rule was instituted.

Property damage and police violence

01:21:34:16

DERAY MCKESSON:

When I think about the property damage that happened in St. Louis, I'm always mindful that I don't have to condone it to understand it. And there was so much that was happening in St. Louis at the time; there were so

many – there were such incredible injustices that were happening to the community over and over and that energy went somewhere. And I'm also mindful that the only violence that I ever saw was the violence of the police. That we sort of understand property damage and violence toward individuals as two different things. And, like, we didn't kill anybody. The police killed Mike Brown and then they killed eleven people while we were in the street. That is wild. That Kajieme Powell got killed nine days after Mike Brown did, like, almost right around the corner. That, like, it just never stopped, you know? To the police would always play a video of property damage that happened on one random night. And then we're like, well, why did you shoot the kid at the gas station? Why did you shoot the guy who had a knife outside? Why did you kill the kid by the deli? You know? Like… And then they're like, I don't know. And it's like, well, you were the violent people. We didn't do this.

The beginnings of the Black Lives Matter movement

01:22:51:01

DERAY MCKESSON:

What is always important to remember is that there is no movement without what happened in Ferguson. That like that is the spark, it is the impetus, and what's so important about that is that it's not founded by a set of people, it wasn't started by any one person, two people or three people. It was organic and the protest spread organically across the country. There's like, been this myth has emerged that a set of people started the protest, started a movement, that it happened in some way that methodically was spread by a small set of people. And when you look back, it's like, I remember on August 17th and 18th and 19th that there were all these cities in protest. Way before anybody had said Black lives – you know, 'cause the

term Black Lives Matter, as the way the protests were identified, came much later. It was hashtag Mike Brown in the beginning, and hashtag Ferguson. Like, those were the two things that spread. So, when you look at the charts of how we talked about the movement, Black Lives Matter doesn't even exist as a phrase in the first month or so, right? But the protest spread all across the country very quickly. I remember when, you know, 'cause I still technically worked in Minneapolis, and there were protestors in Boston who chained themselves, like, on a highway. They blocked this highway but they, like, chained themselves to like barrels of something, these huge barrels. And I'll never forget people calling my office in Minneapolis -- we had to take my phone number off the website -- they called, upset with me being like, "I can't believe you got these people," and I'm like, I don't know the people in Boston, they're doing this in solidarity with the work that is happening in St. Louis, but it was really powerful to see people organically organize, right? There's this myth that it wasn't organic, that, like it – so, one of the things that capitalism does is that it sort of reinforces this notion that hierarchy is the only way to organize, and there's this notion that it crept up in the movement that it was hierarchical, these people came from somewhere and made people organize or helped people organize around the country. It was organic.

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Now, when I think about the movement today, it was a movement born of the police killing people on the street, that that is what got people in the street, it's what kept people on the street, it's what spread it all across the country and that was really important. When we say Black Lives Matter, we say it as a statement of fact, right? That this is about acknowledging that this is true, and that we know it's true. And part of our work is to make it true in all facets of life, right? So it is as much about the police as it is about making

sure that people can live in full and complex identities – like all these things that were born because of the struggle that happened in the street. And I think about how even in St. Louis it was so much, like, nine hundred percent of it was the police, but then what you saw was like, we had to work through these identity issues, too. I remember the first drummer that came out, ever, the first drummer was trans, and like there were a lot of people who had never been around a member of the trans community. And, we had to work through these identity issues, it was like people had to work on their sexism and their homophobia and their transphobia in the street. And the importance of that is that opened up space around identity for us to talk about and organize about and you've seen that happen all across the country. And the third thing is that it's an acknowledgement that while we focus on individual issues, like Mike Brown got killed, Khajieme Powell got killed, Freddie Gray was killed, we know that the system has to change. That, like, the difference between accountability and justice – people always use those terms interchangeably, but we think about them as similar but not the same. That accountability is what happens after the trauma. Justice is the idea that people shouldn't have to experience the trauma in the first place, right? So, the work is twofold. It is about accountability for the officer, like, let's do that… but the other half of the work, the big part of the work is, like, how do we bring justice to be real? So, when I think about the work we focused on since the protest, it has been almost exclusively the justice. Like, how do we make sure that these things don't happen in the first place. Because, what we saw with the protest, and when I think about protest – is that protests open space for us to do the work, right? That if we hadn't shut down streets, and, you know, gotten arrested, and made so much noise about these issues, people wouldn't've cared. But it was opening up that space that allowed us to think about solutions and scale.

Black Lives Matter representatives meeting with Obama

01:27:13:06

DERAY MCKESSON:

Yeah, I think it was an important meeting for all of us to happen because it was an acknowledgement from the administration that what we were saying was at least real to them, right? So, we knew it was real to us. We didn't need that validation for our own sanity, but there were a lot of people – and people don't remember that in August, September, October and November of 2014, there were a lot of people who didn't believe us. There were a lot of people who thought it was interesting what was happening in the streets, but they thought we were being dramatic, right? There were a lot of Black people who thought that – I remember people telling us, "don't bring this to our…" to their city, and we're like, "what do you mean? The police are killing people in your city, we don't have to bring it there. We're just highlighting this. We didn't do this," you know? So, it was important for a lot of people that Obama invited the activists into the oval office because it was – it helped us make the argument that this was a real thing to the people who had been struggling to believe us. And I remember that vividly. There were a lot of people who did not believe us. There were people who told us this wasn't the way to make change, why don't you go to meetings. And we're like, we tried the meetings, we tried to call people, we tried to email, people didn't pay attention. And we shut down five streets, suddenly everybody wants to talk. So that was a big meeting, and, you know, Brittney was eventually appointed to the task force in 20th century policing by Obama, which was also big because it helped us sort of understand the structural things. Because when we looked back we realized that, like, when the police kill somebody, it almost always leads to an outcry. It rarely leads to

accountability. It never leads to systemic change, right? So, Brittney's participation on the task force was our first, sort of, lens to say like, what are the things we could do that would lead to systemic – we know how to protest, we've figured this out and we've done it in a way that people haven't done in a long time, and we know some of the levers around individual accountability for an officer. Like, is it the grand jury… like, we started to learn that stuff. But we just didn't know the systemic stuff very well and Brittney's participation on the task force was our first entrance into being key players in like in the systemic part because before the activists it was like a lot of lawyers, and a lot of – you know, it was like, career people who had done this their whole life as opposed to people who had risked their life in the street like this.

The role of social media and the press during the protests

01:29:33:06

DERAY MCKESSON:

Yeah, so I often say that Twitter saved our life. Not because Twitter itself was so important, but because our ability to use a platform like that is what made sure that Missouri couldn't erase us and it was unlike any of the other platforms because, you know, you think about social media and Twitter specifically as that – it changes the pace at which information can flow. So, like, we could tweet -- I could tweet, in two seconds, be at the galleria, three-thirty. A thousand people could be there, twenty police officers. Like, we just had the power to do those sorts of things. And, you know, Missouri, because of the no-fly zone that was instituted immediately, Missouri would've tried to convince you that we didn't exist. They were like, "Oh, this didn't happen," and we were like what? But we had a means to tell people immediately that this was real. But you think about 2014, technology's changed a lot. In 2014,

there was no Twitter video, there was no periscope, there was no Facebook live, there was no Instagram live, like the only video function we had – and you couldn't even embed videos on Twitter – so the only thing we had was Vine. So, we became like master viners. So we'd literally like take a video of something, we'd run away from the crowd and then we would put the phone up to our ear, try and find the best five seconds of audio and then clip it and put it on the internet. It was like a while – I think about how quick we were able to turn those things around, but it was huge. Twitter was really important to us. And it was also important because very quickly you could see a community consensus around something, so you're like, ok, did something just happen in the neighborhood? Then you find fifteen people tweeting about it and you're like, ok that's real. Or I think about – I don't know if you remember Martisse Johnson. Martisse was a student at UVA who was beat up by the police and like, I'll never forget, I was at the dentist's office, and I get these DMs from students being like, my friend just got beat up by a police officer, and I'm like, you know–– But at that time, I had a big platform, so I was getting a lot of things from people being like, can you amplify this? And I was always a little nervous because if I amplified something that's not real, then it'll be like – I'll be on Breitbart as like, "DeRay McKesson, you know, participates in hoax about the police because he hates the police."

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So, I'll never forget, and I'm still friends with some of these students today, and they're not students, they're adults now, but… I get these messages, my friend Martisse Johnson just got beaten up by the police last night. And I'm like, I haven't seen anything, I'm searching Martisse's name on Twitter, don't see anything, can't find a news article about it. But the woman who called me was really intense, and I'm saying to her, like, please tell me you're

telling the truth because if I – I wanna help you, but if this is not true, it'll be bad for all of us. So, she's like, it's true, she's so intense, and thank God for her… So, I get off the phone and I look back and I'm like, wow, we really were ballsy back then, so I called the president's office at UVA, and I'm like, do you have a statement on the beating of Martisse Johnson. The woman that answers the phone freaks out, she doesn't know what to say, so she transfers me to communications. Communications also freaks out. So, then I realize something probably happened because that was such a bizarre response from the president's office. So, I just start – I find some people who've tweeted about him, and I just amplify it. I'm just like, this happened, this is wild… So then very quickly, the news people start calling me for quotes and I'm like, I've never been to UVA, don't know Martisse personally but you should call these people. And I'll never forget us being able to help make that a national story. Because of a social media platform people can reach out to us. There were all these incredible young people who cared, they just didn't have a big platform, but they were right, they had the story, all they needed was help amplifying it. They had already done so much work, and platforms like Twitter allowed us to do that in really incredible ways. I think back and I think about what it meant to be friends with people because you knew them online first, and that's actually what's really interesting about the end of the protest, the first wave, because we had to learn how to be friends in real life, right? 'Cause I had known you online and I had seen you in the street, but we had never really spent time together, and all of a sudden it was like, oh, we gotta learn each other – I often think about we… Sort of, I knew your heart before I knew your name, right? I knew the way you spoke about things, I knew your routine online before I knew anything about your life, before I knew what you looked like, and that was sort of an interesting thing.

01:33:55:06

And we were the myth busters. I'll never forget Chief Dotson, the chief of police in the city, one day he's like, the protestors threw rocks at me when we were at this gas station and it's like, Dotson, if we actually threw rocks at you, y'all would've shot us. But, like, immediately, we could tweet videos that night and be like, we didn't throw rocks, this didn't happen. Like, we could actually work with the press in a way, that was big, and, you know, the press was actually really important for us too in St. Louis, because they were really skeptical – even the national press, Don Lemon, those sorts of people – but the police were like equal opportunity sort of terror to everybody. So, when Don Lemon gets tear-gassed, it's like, it was great, because it was like, Don, we told you! They're tear-gassing people, right? And then he gets tear gassed. Or, when Chris Hayes is out – it's so interesting to look back and think about Chris's show had just started when the protests… I'll never forget, Chris was out, and we couldn't stand still but reporters could, so Chris goes to interview somebody and he's standing still and this woman's like, "You don't get to stand still!" Like, you don't get to do that. And he had to walk, too. And it was one of those things where it was important because the reporters had to experience so much of what we had to experience. There was a local reporter, I'll never forget him, it was one of the early nights… we get cleared off the street, but his car is still on the street a little bit because him and his cameraman are taking footage. And he just won't move, so he's still taking footage, and the police aren't really – they're not heckling him, but they're annoyed. And we're behind him on a side street. So, the police can't see us, but we can see him. And next thing you know, they tear gas his car. They shoot a canister perfectly under his car and his whole car is enveloped in tear gas. And that changed his reporting forever in St. Louis. It was incredible to see, you know, because he went from being a

skeptic to us, to being like, "they tear-gassed my car!" We're like, we told you! Y'all didn't believe us! But it was Twitter that allowed us to amplify those, and it was the incredible work that people who were there – all of us who were there – to amplify these things and figure out how to use a platform well.

The Mapping Police Violence Project

01:36:07:10

DERAY MCKESSON:

If you get killed in the United States by a police officer and a newspaper doesn't write about you then you don't exist in the data set. So, the government doesn't keep reliable data about the people killed by police which is sort of wild. There have been some years where the state of Florida has reported zero people killed in the whole state by police and you're like, well, we know that's a lie. And this data is important for us and one of the ways that we believed in it is – that our data is correct – is that they died, right? So, we have records of people dying, and there have been a set of activists way before the protests who started to work on this – Killed by Police and Fatal Encounters are the first two big databases that developed a methodology that created a space for all of us who followed and shout out to them – so we currently… police violence is the most comprehensive database of police violence in the country. One of the most popular is the Washington Post. The Washington Post has a database for police violence. The Washington Post, for instance, only includes on-duty killings that include a gun. So, Eric Garner is not in the database. Those officers were on duty. He was not killed with a gun. Botham Jean was killed by a police officer – if you remember when the officer walked into his apartment in the middle of the night – she was off-duty, and it included a gun. So, Botham Jean's not

in the database. So, we have the only database that is all on-duty and off-duty, all weapons. So, our data set is public. People can use it. It's been used in over a thousand studies and research articles because it is all on and off and all weapons. So, that was really important to us. And that was the first analysis that we did. And then the other two big things that we did is we were trying to figure out what, structurally, is happening and what we realized is that there were two big things at play. We created the first public database of abuse-of-force policies around the country.

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DERAY MCKESSON:

We realized that the rules around when officers can use force matter a lot. And the second is that we created the first database of police union contracts around the country, because we realized – and it was a hunch at the beginning and then it turned out to be true – we realized that the rules around accountability really matter. So, what we know today – that is, it'll probably public by the time this ever comes out, we've not published this yet, – is that the police have actually killed more people since the protest, not less. Which is sobering. But, in the thirty largest cities and the hundred largest cities, police violence has actually decreased in a way that is statistically significant. What we didn't anticipate is that it would increase dramatically in suburban communities and in rural communities at such a rate that it offsets the decrease in urban communities. So, that's been interesting. A third of all the people killed by a stranger in the United States is actually killed by a police officer, and 2019 was the first year ever where Black people were actually more afraid of being killed by an officer than being killed by community violence. And what we realized, too, is that there are all these laws, policies, and practices that protect the police. In California, there's a law that says any investigation of an officer that lasts

more than a year can never result in discipline regardless of the outcome. That's wild. In Florida, if you file a complaint against an officer, there's a panel of three people. It is one person appointed by the police department – that makes sense – one person appointed by the accused – that doesn't make sense – and the third person is appointed by both of those two people. Well, that doesn't make any sense at all. But these are in cities all across the country. It's not like one or two. In Oregon, the law says that–– In Oregan the law says that an officer can use deadly force if they think you've just committed a felony or if they think you're about to commit a felony. This is why nobody's ever convicted, because the law is so permissive, you know. But this is in cities and states all across the country. In Louisiana, officers get thirty days before they can be interrogated. Thirty days!? That's wild.

The death of Freddie Gray and moving back to Baltimore

01:39:57:15

DERAY MCKESSON:

I moved to St. Louis; St. Louis was important to me. The protests were really important. And then it was like this-- this issue is everywhere. There were so many people in St. Louis who understood the issue, which is why we were all in the street. And I wanted to go home and fight the issue at home which is why I went back home. I saw Freddie Grey gets killed and it is a big deal across the country. When we think about – you know one of the interesting things, when we think about having been at the protests at the beginning – I got to see the way public perception is shifted around the protest. And there are about four or five cases that were huge in terms of shifting the way the public talked about us and the police. It was Sandra Bland, she was the first woman victim, that was sort of a national figure. And, importantly, if you remember, she had all these videos online of her

already, so she was the first victim that humanized herself before the media got to her. That was interesting. I remember being in Texas and we were out in the street, and somebody had looped the audio of her voice at one of the protests. It was one of the weirdest – 'cause all of a sudden we're marching and you're like, that's Sandra Bland's voice, and that was different, but that was a huge deal in terms of people understanding the violence towards women, because most of the people killed by police are men and almost all the data is skewed towards men and that's almost only because the reliable data we have is on violence that results in death, we know that women are targets of violence that doesn't result in death in huge numbers, sexual assault, verbal assault. We know that queer members of the community, trans members of the community, are also victims of those acts of violence. And Sandra was the first case that allowed us to open at the national level. But Freddie Gray was one of the ones that, like, people have a fascination with the city of Baltimore, so that was important. Baltimore was the first city where the protests were really intense during the day. There was not another city at the time where the protests were intense during the day. And because there was a video of Freddie Gray before his death getting into the car and then he dies, it was just such an easy way for people to be like something clearly went wrong. You know? And that was a big deal. I remember being in the street – there was a curfew in Baltimore also, if you remember, it was like a ten o'clock curfew, I think – and we pushed the curfew the first night and it was easy, the second night they were a little more intense. But there were a lot of things about Baltimore that were really unique and different, yeah.

Disagreeing with Obama

01:42:31:03

DERAY MCKESSON:

One of the few disagreements that I had with President Obama was about his comments about Baltimore. If you remember, Baltimore was… there was property damage in Baltimore. And, you know, always mild for their broken windows and not the same things for their broken spines. The police snapped Freddie Gray's spine and there's no amount of broken windows that is comparable to that. President Obama got on TV and called the protestors thugs. And after our first meeting in the White House–– after the first meeting, the civil rights meeting–– we had a meeting, an intergenerational meeting of civil rights leaders, and afterwards I walk up to him. And I'm like, "President Obama," he's like, "DeRay," and, you know, most of the staffers in the White House at that point were our age so we had been in constant communication with them about the protest across the country, we didn't agree about a host of things–– yeah, we certainly disagreed about a hist of things, but they would call when something happened and be like, could they help? I don't know, can you reign in the police? You tell me.

01:43:30:08

So, we knew some of them and I knew that they were frustrated with some things I'd said on TV, like earlier. So, I see President Obama and I'm like, "hey, President Obama, can we talk?" He's like, "Yeah, what's up?" And, I'm like, "You can't call people thugs." And he's like, "DeRay, you've said things on TV you shouldn't say." And it was because I had just the police had engaged in genocide and like the White House was freaked out about it. And I was like, yeah, but I'm not the president. And he was like, "You're right," and I was like, "I know I'm right!" You know, but it was like, Obama, you can't call people thugs. That actually feeds into the way that racists want to portray what we're doing in the street. I get that you probably can't condone

property damage like this, but you don't have to use this language that we all know is racially coded about Black bodies to criticize the protests like that. And he was like, I get it. And it was like, okay. He, like, didn't clean it up in the public space, but I'm happy I got to say that because it was like, you know, and that's what we believe about being in the room, right? That like it's no win to just be in the room that, like, we've been to a million meetings and Lord if we could have been in meetings to prevent the protests, but people didn't want to, we had to shut things down to make it happen. That at the very least, that part of our commitment is to bring the truth into the room with us, that like that's a part of what it means to be in the room, so being in the room with him was like I can't let you just say this thing about the protestors, of which I am one and like let it go unchallenged, you know?

Meeting with Obama at the White House

01:45:00:09

DERAY MCKESSON:

The White House reached out to us. They were like we're putting together a meeting of civil rights leaders across generations. The first intergenerational meeting of civil rights leaders that's ever happened in the White House. So, we were like, okay. We'll go. Brittney had already been because she had been for the task force, she had been in the first meeting – the oval office meeting. I hadn't been. I definitely had met him before, I don't know if I had been to the White House for ,like, a briefing or something. But yeah, they were like, it'll be–– say what you–– come prepared to say whatever you want to say. They would always ask for you to send in stuff if you wanted him to potentially be prepared for something, but we didn't–– I think we had just launched Campaign Zero at that time, we had just launched this platform around a set of policy recommendations. So, we were still

collecting data. So, we came with some stuff that we knew, but it was in the early-ish days. But that was good. That was our first meeting then we had a much bigger one later.

01:45:56:15

So, it was young people. It was me, Brittney, it was the youth lead from the NAACP, there was a youth lead from the National Action Network, Sherilyn Ifill was there, Sharpton. It was probably like 13 of us, maybe? It was like maybe an hour and a half, two hours. It went over the allotted time. So, it was supposed to be an hour and then when he got flagged to leave he cut it so that only the young people could talk. It was interesting. I don't know if you'd ever been in a meeting with him, but people were so enamored with him that they weren't always honest, right? So, people would walk in and this meeting's a great example, is that there was so much, "We love you, President Obama." happening at the beginning. And the young people, we were like–– I probably was–– Brittney was sitting right next to him, but we went around the other way, so I was like, I think, the first person, the first younger person to speak in that wave. And people were very like, "Thank you so much!" and we're like, you know the protestors, were like we just got–– we're getting beat up in the streets, so I guess we're thankful to be here, but we're here to do work, you know. We're here to push and press. Sherilyn Ifill was such a–– is such a model to me because she–– She's so good at being intense and direct in a way that people can receive but it's still intense and direct and she was so great in that meeting. Shout out to Sherilyn Ifill. But yeah, it was, like–– it was important to us to press in that meeting. There were so many thank you's that literally he says, in the middle of the beginning, he goes, "I know people are excited to be here, thank you for being appreciative of me, but we need to talk about the issues," and it was like, thank youPresident Obama because if I sit through

another speech about how you've changed people's lives I'm gonna lose my mind, right? That, like, we're to talk about why there are so many people in the street and why this issue's happening across the country, we're not here to celebrate you in this moment. And I appreciate that he stopped that.

Obama saying "all lives matter"

01:48:09:07

DERAY MCKESSON:

I don't know why he said all lives matter. I hope that if he had to talk about these issues today, he'd be–– he would center race much more than he did while he was president. That it was–– It was hard to watch him get on TV, or like, say things and you're like this is not it. Right? That, like… If they killed one of your children, you would not be on TV talking about all lives matter, right. That this is specifically about race and he was not clear on those things when he was president. He wasn't clear on them off the record in the room I was in and he wasn't clear about them on the record. I want to believe that today he might be better about these issues but I haven't seen him, haven't spoken to him since that last meeting.

Building a coalition

01:49:06:00

DERAY MCKESSON:

Yeah, so what's interesting is that when you look at the polling data is that right after the protests, it is one of the first times where white people, as a majority, acknowledge racism as a structural thing. You just see this happen all of a sudden, which is really big. And we know that the only way to win will be to win with a coalition, that it'll have to be with a coalition of people that are not just people of color understanding that these issues really

matter. And St. Louis was a great example of… there were so many white people who got it, who were willing to risk and use their privilege in ways that did good. Who understood that, like, the only way to build a strong community of which they will also participate in is one where everybody has resources and access, and it was a great model. You know, I think about one of the more intense actions that happened that was planned by an incredible organizer, Elizabeth Vega, is we shut down a police department, we shut down that St. Louis metro police department and there were a lot of white people, because we knew if Black people, one by one walked in a police department they'd close the door really quickly, so all these white people dressed up really nice on a morning, go into a police department in pairs and in singles asking for things. And then there are a couple of Black people, we come in at the end, we sit down inside the police department and shut down the police department from the inside, which was wild.

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And the police were livid. But we saw–– there were so many examples of white people showing up and using their resources and privilege. I think about–– there was a woman who had a big house – I don't know who found her – but she allowed us to sleep at her house. I didn't have anywhere to sleep, so I slept at her house on an air mattress in a random room most of the time I was in St Louis. And, like, she had the resources, and I was one of–– There would be five of us sleeping at that house in a given night. But yeah, there were a lot of people who showed up. And you know, again, if the problem's gonna end, it'll have to be structural. And part of what it means to be an ally and an accomplice is to fight for things that don't necessarily impact you and to get as close to the issue as possible. You know, like–– so what does it mean–– People expect me to talk about race, you know, but when I talk about race, people are like, you're making everything about race

and I'm like, race made everything about me. I didn't do this, right. I'm trying to playback what is happening to me, but people don't expect a straight white man to suddenly think that police violence is wrong and to speak about it, you know, or speak about women's issues or queer issues, so part of what it means to show up for other people is actually to use your resources to do those things.

What it means to be 'woke'

01:51:38:20

DERAY MCKESSON:

Yeah, I think that woke has become one of those words that might not mean as much anymore because it's been overused, but it's an acknowledgement of seeing the way systems work and seeing the way that-- that injustice sort of shows up. So, we often think about system not psyche; the system is often at fault, it's not an individual person's psyche that's screwed up that put them in poverty, that made them experience hunger, that made them experience any form of economic injustice or trauma or assault. That systems are at play here. So, when I think about woke, it is a do you see that there's something bigger at play than the individual actions of a person?

Obama's policies around race

01:52:22:10

DERAY MCKESSON:

So as president, you know, there were a lot of things that weren't bad, right? You think about some of the stuff he did around letting people out of prison. You think about the stuff they did at the end of the administration around private prisons, women and children. Big, right? Around the police Obama was unwilling to be aggressive, so they did end the program to give military-

grade weapons to police departments. So, the Obama administration did important work around limiting military-grade weapons to go to police departments… that Trump has undone. But he did that. The cop's office had some good analysis, and the report was important. We met with Valerie Jarrett and Roy Austin before we met with President Obama, and she was so knowledgeable about all the issues we cared about and so was Roy. We were able to go back and forth about policy in like deep ways… and that was really powerful. There were people in the technology team, who we also talked to a lot, because we were collecting all this data and they were trying to do some data stuff. So, there were parts of the administration that we had worked with on a lot of these issues before we met President Obama because we were trying to figure out what solutions look like, but he just was unwilling to be aggressive.

Second meeting with Obama

01:53:38:23

DERAY MCKESSON:

So in the second meeting we had with Obama, whic was–– I had gotten arrested in Baton Rouge. I spent seventeen hours in jail or in custody, jail for a part of them. I was on a bus for a lot of those hours. And then we get this meeting with Obama. So, it's me, Brittney's there again, and then Misha who's a protestor from Minneapolis. And then it's like police chiefs, the governor of Louisiana – where I'd just spent time in jail – it's like thirty people in the room, and I'll never forget that meeting because he'd invited a researcher whose research has now been debunked who concluded that police violence wasn't a function of race, that race had nothing to do with police violence. And we were in the room like, what are we doing? You know, and, again, shout out to Sherilyn. It was the protestors and people like

Sherilyn who were like, will you condition DOJ funding on whether the police agree to a set of things, right? And he was just unwilling to do it. So, it was hard, you know. It was one of those things where we pushed – and he was definitely annoyed with me in that meeting because we had to go around and share our solutions but here's the thing, I can see all these other people when I want to; I can reach out to any of the other people in the room whenever I want to. I will probably never meet with you again, right. So, I spoke towards the end and all I had was feedback for him, right? And he looked at me and was like, is that it, DeRay? And I'm like, yes, that's it! This is about you because you have the most power in the room to put pressure on people, either through the bully pulpit or through the administration, and we don't know why you're unwilling to do that.

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Yeah, so it was a push for DOJ funding for police departments, it was to use the bully pulpit to highlight the importance of protest, which is what he did at the end. But it was hard to move past the thugs thing and the all lives matter, like, Obama you are not helping us, right?. Those statements don't help. But I remember at the end where like–– I remember talking to people in the administration when they saw the videos, like, Laquan Mcdon–– like when they saw them at the begin–– when they heard about Laquan McDonald, like those sorts of things. Those were big, you know? It was important that they saw them because it stopped being, oh, I think they're being intense, it was like, no no no, that happened, you know? This is real. And then the administration ended. So, there were some things that we know that they were committed to and their strategy was like, we'll just leave it for Hillary, right? So, like a national use of force standard – we all had worked at the administration to try and see a commitment to that and they were like–– the administration was ending, and they're like. "Oh, we'll

pass it off to Hillary," and then like that didn't happen. So, they did get a little more–– Behind the scenes, the team got much more–– like Stephanie Young – who was probably the person we talked to the most, she was the person on Valerie's team who was in charge of managing the Black constituency, she was our contact – and we talked to her a ton and Valerie. They were way more on our side, policy-wise, toward the end. But it was this like – we'll pass this on to the next administration and then like we get this guy.

01:56:54:22

DERAY MCKESSON:

If I remember correctly, he said, you know, "if I had a son" – it was like that whole speech. I thought it was fine. I thought that was good, yeah. I think, you know, he clearly understood what racism was. You know, that is the anomaly of Obama is that there seemed to be an unwillingness to talk about race directly when he was president; about the way that systems and laws dramatically disadvantage people of color. Like, he would skirt around it. He would sort of touch it a little bit. They did some important stuff around prisons in the end. Healthcare, obviously, huge deal but I think we all had wished for not even more aggressive just more honest, right? This is what we think about the police. They are killing people! That is true, you know? You don't need to scream it. You don't need to yell it. It just is happening.

What it means to be a leader

01:57:46:00

DERAY MCKESSON:

Part of what it means to be a leader is sometimes you take people to places where they aren't ready to go at the moment, but you get them there, right? That's part of what it is. And is that always comfortable? No. Is it always easy? Absolutely not. Is it always fun? No, right?. But that's the job you

signed up for. And part of it, when we think about part of the commitment on race, you know this is true. It'd be different if this wasn't true and we were trying to like, I don't know, make an argument but this is true, right? And like, do we all need to figure out how to get people to the place? Yeah. And like this is what I think with the protest: the protest got people there, right? It went from people being like, "this is ridiculous, I don't know why these kids are in the street to," all of a sudden, everybody's talking about race and justice, right? Was it comfortable? No. Was it easy? No. But it was a lot of people in streets who were like, the only way to lead my city to a place that I can be safe is if I take them there, right? And that's what we were asking of President Obama is like white people don't want to do this. They've never wanted to do this. They've never willingly wanted to talk about race, but part of your role is to push people to do that stuff, right?

01:58:56:11

The truth has to come before the reconciliation, right? That people want to do a lot of reconciliation without the truth. And if there's anything I get five years later it's how afraid people are of the police, right? That people just, like, can't–– there's something about the police–– we say to people–– I'm on panels with police chiefs, and they will say to me, are you saying the police should never kill somebody? And I say do you have any kids or is there a kid you love and they'll be like, yeah. I'm like, get that person in your mind. And I'm like, what could that person do that you'd be okay with a bullet through their eyes? What mistake could they make that you'd be fine with the police killing them? And every time they're like, I don't know. If you don't know then why should any other parent have to deal with this? You know what I mean? Or helping people understand – with the police specifically – by the time you've called 9-1-1, the bad things already happened, right? We're trying to live in a world where the bad things don't happen in the first place

and that is about an investment in other things, right? That like the best of what the police do is after the trauma's already occurred. That like, we should actually invest in other things. And we just didn't see Obama use his bully pulpit to make any of those arguments, you know, about race. You're right. He did get pilloried around the Boston stuff with Skip Gates, but he was right, you know? It was true. He didn't make anything up. It's wild that Skip Gates gets, like, accosted going into his own house. That is wild.

Strategies and tactics of the movement

02:00:27:11

DERAY MCKESSON:

People in power always want to negotiate away, right? They want to figure out a way to negotiate how to stop this or how to move this… and what's so beautiful about the protests is that there was no committee, there was no set of founders, there was no leader who started everything. There are people who, after the protest, sort of set up all these mechanisms around the country; who started chapters, who did all this stuff but that was not the impetus of the protest, right? That is the myth. There was no group that started the protest. And the beauty of that is that in the beginning, while we're in St. Louis for the 400 days that birthed all of this stuff, the police department in Ferguson, which was small, 50 officers, they would always try and meet. They were like, "Can we have a meeting?" And the protest's official line was we don't negotiate with terrorists. That was it. Every time. They'd be like, "Come to a meeting." It's like, we don't negotiate with terrorists. And it was like, if we do a meeting with you, you do a meeting with everybody. Either this is a meeting where three thousand people can come and talk or it's no meeting at all. Because we knew the strategy was, like, get five of us in a room, get us to commit to something to squelch the

power of the protest, and what we'd always say is that if you had cared about this before we got in the street, we could've done that, right? If you wanted a meeting to talk about solutions, you should've done that before there was a crisis, but now we're here, right? So, the thing about Obama – it makes sense to me that somebody who has structural power would criticize people for not wanting to engage in the system in that way, but we'd done that and it didn't lead to anything. You know, I do think that it is like a both-and, and this is why we went to the meetings with Obama, like, we didn't leave the street to go to the meeting with him. We were still in the street and we were in the meetings. Because at the end of the day, our goal is how do we stop it, right? And if Obama, you have power to stop it structurally or to do something to limit it quickly, right? But there are eighteen thousand police departments. So, this is going to be a local fight no matter what you do at the national level. And like, this is a both-and. So, I think the criticism is what people in structural power say, they say things like, you know, you should be sitting down and meeting with people, but I remember during that time, people didn't want to meet with us, they wanted to be seen with us. So, they wanted to sit down and they'd be like, what do you think? And we'd tell them and they'd be like, well we can't do it. Why did we come to the meeting in the first place? You could do this, you are unwilling to do this.

The Obama administration's values and priorities around race

02:02:54:11

DERAY MCKESSON:

So here's the thing. I shouldn't have to think whether he identifies with it or not. I should know. And the fact that I don't know means that there's a question, right? This is what we think about values. That values are really interesting. When we think about this question of, like, what are your

values? Values are things that I should just see. The moment that I have to start searching for values, they're not values in the first place. So, when you start a business and say, we value community and you walk in and you don't feel nothing about community, that's not a value, right? So, when I think about the administration, they clearly understood race because we knew them offline and they got it, right? Were they willing to use the administration to do something about it in not even an aggressive way but an honest way? It was unclear. The speechwriters would invite people into the White House at night, like seven or eight o'clock at night. So, I went in a group of seven people… one random night with the speechwriter. And literally, it was like–– We sat around a table. We didn't know each other before, like, I didn't know them before, and I certainly didn't know the speech writer, and we literally were like pitching language to use for the state of the union about our cause. So, we were like, don't say this, do say this, and we have this long conversation about it. So, they understood race. They understood that this was important. They understood that language mattered. They got it. Were they willing to use the power of the administration to do something about it? It wasn't clear when he was in office.

Obama's town halls on race

02:04:21:12

DERAY MCKESSON:

The conversation about race is so important, right? But when you have structural power, the conversation just isn't enough. When I go on TV and talk about race, it's like I'm always appealing to some-- some mechanism of power. I want the city council, the mayor, the police chief, like that is our power because I don't have it and the protestors don't have it. We have the

power of the vote; we have the power of pressure. That is what we have, right? So, when you see people like the president or like a mayor or a governor only talk about the issues and not use their executive power or some other power to actually make a difference, it's half important. So, it is good that Obama talked about race. It was certainly better than some of the stuff he said before. But you could, overnight, make the DOJ change the way they fund a police department. It wouldn't take an act of congress. It wouldn't take a commission; it wouldn't take a hearing. You could do this. Would it be blowback and painful? Probably, I don't know. Nobody's ever done it before. But could you, do it? You could, you know? Why didn't he, you know? I don't know. I think that like–– I think that it was some of the blowback that he got across the years about the pastor in the early days who he had to disavow, about Gates. I think there might have been some nervousness about those things, I don't know. We didn't talk about it. It is just wild that the police have killed so many people. And it's wild that, again, a third of all the people killed by strangers–– In Phoenix, Arizona, last year, 1 in 5 murders was committed by an officer. That is wild. If 20% of the murders in a city was committed by a gang, we would literally murder them all. And like the public sentiment–– The police had built a case around, like, destroying these peoples' lives, you know? When the police do it, that's just another day in the city. That is wild. And that was always our thing. We get the caution. We get that people don't stand up to the police, like, I get it. People are dying. This isn't like oh–– It is death, you know? Like, that is still what is so shocking to me. So, I don't–– It is I'm as confused as why Obama and a host of people weren't more intense about these things when they had a chance to be. Because it's like… they died!

The 2016 election

02:06:55:17

DERAY MCKESSON:

You know, I will say I publicly supported Hillary when she became the nominee and got a lot of flak for it in the activist community. I will never forget, I woke up that morning and one of the articles was, DeRay McKesson does not speak for Black people, like all these articles criticizing me for my support of Hillary. And what I was mindful of then, because I traveled around the country, is that I believed that he could win, right? That like–– And Hillary's team certainly thought that he could win. That… Yeah, I believed that he could win. So, I support her. People called me everything but a child of God. And then he wins. And I think, you know, honestly, like many other people, we were tired, we had been in the street for so long, and then all of a sudden, you're like, I gotta gear for another fight, that was dramatic. So, I was tired. And it was like, just trying to figure out would there be a moderating force in congress or not? And we learned pretty quickly, there was not. He just is doing whatever he wants. But yeah, if anything, I was immediately tired. I will never–– I was at the Javits Center when-- when Hillary lost. I'm in like this–– in like the VIP areas, so it's like, I'm sitting–– Lady Gaga, the most random group of people were sitting next to you. And I get a call from a reporter right when it's clear he's going to win, and the reporter's like, "DeRay, what're you planning to do?" And I'm like, "I have no clue. I have not thought about this part of it." Not because we can't organize around it but because we have literally been in the street for two years straight. And like, I'm a little tired, there are a lot of us who are tired, you know what I mean? So, I was like waiting for the next set of people to come up and, like, I'm-- I'm ready to follow somebody at this point. You know, like tell me what you're trying to organize, and we'll follow you. But i

was… Yeah, I was, like, shocked and just like, this is going to be a long, long road ahead.

The toll of protesting

02:08:57:14

DERAY MCKESSON:

Yeah, it was like, I slept in driveways, I slept in peoples' basements, I had no clothes. People asked about the vest, it was the only thing I had that was heavier than a t-shirt. You know? It was like, I had one pair of shoes. It was– – I got dragged out of the police department by my ankles. The first person ever permanently banned from Twitter was banned for raisinb money to try and get me killed. I got sued by five police officers in two cities. You know, it's like my phone got hacked. I was literally at a thing, somebody calls Verizon, poses as me, they get my SIM card swapped over the phone, they hacked into my Twitter and my gmail. It takes me a day to get my phone number back. You know, it's just like… I was in Wikileaks, I was in the Hillary leaks, it had been such a long road, and then it was like, here comes Trump. And this is going to be a whole other fight, you know?

Getting death threats

02:09:52:12

DERAY MCKESSON:

You know, I'm mindful that part of it is that people want you to be afraid, right? Like, the whole goal is to make you too afraid to do the work. The thing that always comforted me a little bit is that I moved around so much that it was like you'll never really know where I am, right? So, like that was the thing that comforted me. In the early days, you know, Netta will tell you that, when we were afraid that we might not make it home, we would leave

notes to each other in our draft messages on Twitter and we had each other's passwords. And that was our way of, like, trying to make sure people knew that we loved them. Which is sort of wild to look back on that that's where we were… the death threats and the phone hacking, and the–– all of it was just so much. And the reality is everything moved so quick, I mean, it was just like, we didn't really have a lot of time to process. So, it wasn't until the protest ended and I, like, went back to Baltimore, and was just sort of like home. And was like, wow that all happened, that was really wild, you know?

02:10:48:16

DERAY MCKESSON:
In the meeting we had that included police chiefs – this was after the Baton Rouge arrests – the FBI had visited my house, had visited Sam's house, had visited Netta's house. And yeah, we were like, stop harassing us. I didn't kill anybody. That's what we were all like. I didn't do it! We are in the streets because the police killed people. We didn't kill anybody! Why is the FBI at my house? You know what I mean? So, I tried to talk to–– I'll never forget, I tried to talk to Loretta Lynch, Attorney General, Loretta Lynch because we had met with her before the FBI visited my house. And, I'll never forget, and in that meeting, I walk up to her, and I know her, I'm like, hey Attorney General Lynch, I just want to talk to you for a second? She's like, "What's up?" I'm like, "The FBI visited my house. I can't believe they did that." And, literally, her face goes still. She looks at me and gives me one of those shoulder taps and then walks away. She's like, no comment. I'm like, you guys, we didn't do anything, you know.

Working with Vanita Gupta and the Department of Justice

02:11:50:08

DERAY MCKESSON:

Yeah, so Vanita led the civil rights division of the department of justice. She was probably our lead person around these issues. It was her team that investigated police departments. So, like, we knew them, we knew the data. She now is at another civil rights organization. But there was no better person to have than her. I remember when we visited her at her office… Vanita was great. And her team, you know, even with the full resources of the DOJ, they only had the capacity to interview about three police departments a year, which is not a lot. But her team, of the people in… in like that administration, they like knew–– they understood policing at the structural level really well. So, you look at the consent decree in Ferguson, it requires them to change the law. They put together the consent decrees, they were aggressive, it was thoughtful, it was like detail down to the minutiae. Like they really–– They got it, and we're still in contact with people–– we're still in contact with Vanita, obviously, but also people from her team still do policing stuff in cities across the country and have been immensely helpful.

Appearing on *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert

02:13:00:06

DERAY MCKESSON:

Colbert's team emailed me through my email address that was on my Twitter bio, I didn't know if it was real. I got a lot of emails like that. I get this email from David Remnick once in the middle of the night. And he's like, "Will you write about the meeting with Obama?" And I remember rolling over and seeing it, and I write back being like, who are you? Like, what do you–– What would I write for? He's like, "New Yorker.com." I'm like, "Can you text me? Like, I have no clue. I don't read the New Yorker, I don't know

who you are. Like, can you text me." He texts me. And then the next day, I'm googling him and I'm like, he runs the New Yorker. There are a lot of things like that. But Colbert's team emailed me being like, can you talk? I like, emailed them back, set up a call, I was on the show talking about white privilege. That interview is actually in the Smithsonian – part of the permanent collection. And then I was on a second time. So, I get arrested in Baton Rouge, and what people don't know about Louisiana is that when you get arrested, the judge has to give you the right to leave the state, and there's like a little box. So, I get arrested, I get out, she doesn't check the box off so I can't leave. So, I have to wait 'til the next day to get out. And Colbert invites me back on to come talk about the arrest, and then I get uninvited. There were like, too many guests. And then Colbert calls me. He's like, "DeRay, we're gonna squeeze you in, I want you to do this." So like, he cared about the issues, and like he got it. I think those platforms – I think what I want to believe I helped to do – 'cause I did a lot, I was on Colbert and The Nightly Show and The Daily Show and Seth Myers and the news and all this stuff – to tell the protest side of the story about what was happening with the police, and I do think the net affected them was really helpful. I really did just get lucky. You know, I think about how I was able to do so much in St. Louis. I benefited from not living in St. Louis. So, I was never afraid that the police were gonna target my family 'cause I didn't live there. It was easier for me to be on the news because I was like, you don't even know where to find me because I have a rental car, I'm sleeping in a random person's spare bedroom with this random cat. You know what I mean? But yeah, it was like–– it was a lot of quick hits on the news, you know. Like those quick things to give language to what was happening. So when I said broken windows are not the same thing as broken spines, the next day, that's on posters in the city. People are saying it around the country. I was always

thoughtful about… if I'm going to do these media things, how do I make sure that it is at least giving people language who don't have it, you know? Like, how do we push back on all lives matter, or the police are like, people are killing us. I'd go on the news and be like the single biggest cause of police deaths is suicide. It's not us, right? Like, how do we like just put this stuff out there and say it really normally because what I realized really quickly was that people–– because I'm a protestor–– people thought I was going to come on and like scream and yell, right? I don't need to scream and yell. This is just true, you know.

"When they go low, we go high"

02:16:01:19

DERAY MCKESSON:

You know, when I think about, "when they go low, we go high," it's not about pacifism, it's really about going back to your convictions. so, when they go low, when they do like the most depraved–– the thing that is immoral, the thing that we know is wrong, we go high as in we go high to our convictions, we go high back to the thing that called us to this earth. We go–– So, for me it is my appreciation for young people and the beauty that they have to reshape the world is why I went in the street in the first place. Whenever I'm challenged of, like, do I really want to do this? Do I care? I'm like always mindful of the kids I taught who are now twenty, but when they were eleven, I believed in them. Or the afterschool programs I opened. I'm trying to build a world that finally is something that is right for them. So, "When they go low, we go high," is about returning to your convictions, it to me is not about, like, pacifism.

The role of rage

02:16:53:01

DERAY MCKESSON:

There's a lot to be mad about. You know? I remember being in the street. I had this moment of being so angry early and what I realized is that I had been taught that, like, anger wasn't supposed to exist at all, and what I-- what I realized in the street is that anger is not supposed to be the only emotion, right? That like, anger and love and joy and happiness, all exist in tandem and that it's actually inhumane to ask somebody not to have anger at all. And once I realized that this sits alongside the other emotions, I was fine. This isn't the overriding emotion, it's not the only one, it's not the biggest one, but it is present. And lord knows there's a lot to be angry about, and what I would often say in the protest is the fact that we call for justice and not revenge is really a testament to the souls of Black people because we have a lot to be angry and vengeful about; the way this country has treated us. I did not see any rage from President Obama around these issues.

Obama's legacy

02:17:54:15

DERAY MCKESSON:

I think Obama got big wins around things like healthcare. I think that at the administration there was a commitment to report on race and to do some–– to lift up the issue. I think that the administration could have been much more aggressive around the issues of race and justice. I think that the prison work will be a defining part of how people think about him. I think that for the protests to start under his administration, there was very little progress around ending the issue that caused the protest in the first place. And, you know, when we think about these issues as organizers, we always think about them as present, not permanent, right? That hunger is present, not

permanent. That poverty is present, not permanent. That police violence is present, not permanent. And part of that work for elected people is saying, if it's not permanent, then what do we do? How do you take people to a place where they say, it's here today, but it doesn't always have to be here. Structurally, how do you make that happen? How do you do it at scale? That's the part of Obama's legacy around race and justice that we just didn't see. The good news is that he's young. What will second-wave Obama be? I don't know. Maybe—maybe he'll come out one day and talk about police violence and help people see it better, you know. Maybe he'll come out and talk about race. Who knows? I'm hopeful.

Protesting in Charleston, South Carolina

02:19:17:12

DERAY MCKESSON:

So, I was in Charleston twice. I went down to Charleston at the invitation of one of the protest organizers when they were first starting to organize. This was before the shooting. And I'll never forget it because I get there in the afternoon, but we are in this organizing meeting until 3 AM and the next day they were having their first community meeting and I was there too. Like, helping to build capacity on the back end. And rest in peace, Muhiyidin was an incredible organizer. He was one of the leaders of the protest and he was killed in New Orleans a couple years ago, which is very sad. He was an incredible leader. And then I came back after the shooting. So, I was there when Obama spoke, I didn't go to that big venue. I went to a funeral of one of the victims, I was in community meetings, I was at the first church service after the shooting sitting next to Rick Santorum, which was very odd. I didn't know who he was until – I'm literally looking at my phone and the news has tweeted a picture of us sitting next to each other. I'm like, who is this guy?

And then he gets on Fox News the next day and is like, DeRay was on his phone the whole time. I don't even know you! But yeah, it was interesting to be down there. I'll never forget that time because they had–– the white supremacists had tweeted, "Go home DeRay," and it trended nationally. They were like you're bring–– It was like this idea that I'm bringing race problems. A white man just walked into a church and killed nine people, nine Black people. I didn't bring anything here. This was already here. And Charleston, actually, is the only place ever where a white person was really negative to me in person in a way that I didn't – so I'm outside the church. This guy walks up to me and he's like, "I've seen you before." I'm like, oh, hi, great to meet you. And he was like, "No! I do not support you!" And I was like, whoa, buddy. He was very pro-cop. But–– But yeah, Charleston was interesting. Charleston was also interesting because I was there the first time, they shut down a street and the Charleston folks were pretty… You know, they-- they understand how race works in their city, right? So, they wanted to shut down the street in a specific way. It wasn't super intense but it was still shut down. And you should've seen the way people flipped out. I've been in places where people chain themselves to stuff. People have done very intense things to shut something down. In Charleston, we shut down the street in the crosswalk. It was like real chill, and you would've thought we'd put five grenades in the – to the see this city's reaction… okay, guys. Chill out.

END TC: 02:21:46:03