

**TAVP Visions After Violence Collection
Interview with Andrew Hairston**

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SAM KIRSCH: [00:00:05] All right, and we're started. My name is Sam Kirsch. Today is May the 5th. It's 11:09 a.m. I'm here with Andrew Hairston. Andrew, thank you so much for being here. Would you mind just introducing yourself? How would you describe yourself?

ANDREW HAIRSTON: Absolutely, sorry to modify already. It's May 10th, 2023. I know – (Laughs)

KIRSCH: What did I say?

HAIRSTON: I think May 5th.

KIRSCH: Oh my God, thank you.

HAIRSTON: (Laughs) It's all good. I think that very much reflects where we are in Texas, especially in the legislative session.

I'm Andrew Hairston. I usually describe myself as a writer and civil rights attorney, first and foremost, but also have descriptors as a Black southerner, a man of faith, a bi guy, a prison abolitionist, and a socialist. And I think we'll probably talk about all of those identities over the next 75 to 90 minutes. But yeah, that's just, like, the sentence of me.

KIRSCH: Yeah, wonderful. So, I don't know, I mean you can take this however you want to, but I mean, where would you say your story begins for you?

HAIRSTON: Yeah, so I was born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina in 1991. I'm the first child of two born to my parents, Reverend Dr. Daryl and Mrs. Karen J. Hairston, and I'll talk more about my parents and my deep reverence for them and appreciation for all that they've given to me. But yeah, we were – my sister and I were born in 1991 and 1996 in North Carolina. Soon after my sister was born, we started moving throughout the midwestern United States.

We had stints in Indiana, Missouri, and Ohio, at least when I was a child, and I graduated from high school in Ohio, and then my parents and sister moved to Oklahoma City in 2009, where they still live. And I think that my foray into this work, and I think that what served as the catalyst for me being invited to this incredible project started in college, when I was at Howard University in DC, I began engaging in some anti-capital punishment work with the university chapter of Amnesty International. And that made me start thinking about U.S. institutions of policing and prisons and, um, just how deeply rotten they are.

KIRSCH: Yeah, and so how would you – like at that time when you were, you know, organizing, you know, with Amnesty, um, I mean how would you say that your views were then and have evolved or changed, if at all, and how did that kind of shape you to where you are now?

HAIRSTON: Yeah, I very much so started, probably in 2011 with the reformist view of policing and prisons, right? You know, capital punishment, I think, is a very worthwhile effort to engage in. I'll talk more about how capital punishment and the Rodney Reed case got me involved with Austin DSA when I moved to Austin in 2019.

But when I was a college student, I thought, Well, you know, we can reform these institutions, right, you know? (Laughs) This may already be controversial. We can put air conditioning in the prisons. We can, you know, like make it nicer, make the building pretty, right? But then, it's like fundamentally – a human being is caged, right, or that a human being could extrajudicially lose their life from this agent of the state, like, that's the problem. But in 2011, I'm thinking, Okay, well, we'll work on this capital punishment campaign, right? That can be a material effort of assistance, perhaps to folks who are in Maryland prisons.

We engaged – I guess it was probably about an eighteen-month campaign because in the spring of 2013, which is the semester I graduated from college, we lobbied legislatures in Annapolis and got a bill passed to end capital punishment in Maryland. So even though I had an overall reformist view of it at the beginning, you know, that felt like a really incredible victory to

register like pretty early on, at the age of 21, as I didn't know quite then that this would be my life's work. But, (laughs) now, all this time later, that was a good way to start.

KIRSCH: Yeah, and that's, um, it's really I think a fascinating kind of perspective to go from somebody who thinks that – yeah, I mean, you know, like it's very understandable thing to think like, people are overheated in prisons and let's put AC in them and that's kind of the way, you know, forward. But I'm curious how you kind of now think about this line of reform and abolition and, you know, where it is to organize, and how to walk the different lines without, you know, kind of just capitulating to recreating and, you know, almost like empowering the carceral system?

HAIRSTON: Yeah. The rubber really hit the road for me in 2014. A former boss of mine described me as a K through JD person. I went from kindergarten through the end of law school with no breaks, and I think I'm still catching my breath, seven years removed from law school.

But in 2014, I was beginning [00:06:05] my second year of law school, and Michael Brown was murdered in Ferguson. And that particularly resonated with me, because my family and I lived in St. Louis, Missouri from 1998 to 2004, and particularly in a suburb called Florissant, which is adjacent to Ferguson. So, you know, a number of incidents of black folks losing their lives to the police had registered in my mind, you know, from my time at Howard to my time at Louisiana State University, where I attended for law school. But Michael Brown especially, you know, this young black man just murdered and left on the street in that way. I felt awful. I still then was kind of in my mind trying to articulate, you know, that vision of an abolitionist future. I still didn't have the language then but started to consider more, kind of creative ways to use a law degree. I was kind of intent on being a public defender when I enrolled in law school, or perhaps engaging with one of my aunts, who's a lawyer in criminal defense work in Louisiana. But that incident served as a catalyst for thinking about more policy shops and impact litigation and organizations that work on trying to have as big of an impact as possible to address some of the harms of the criminal legal system before they manifest in people's lives, and then when they do, to try to mitigate the harms.

So I knew about this organization, Advancement Project, through my father, who has at this point in 2023 been a minister for 35 years, and his Divinity School classmate was the pastor of a church I attended during my time at Howard, and the Associate Minister that church was the general counsel and still is the master project. And so I shot him a line on Facebook and started the dialogue about trying to get an internship with the organization and that did come in the summer 2015 after my second year of law school. Uh, that really is – so I think that nine-month period from August 2014 to May 2015 really got the gears going, right? The idea that, you know, there is something irredeemable about American policing and prisons and that there are different ways to attack the behemoth. But, you know, it's worth it to try to lean your efforts where you can to taking it on. I think its Advancement Project is also more so focused on education work and thought about and still. In my work, consider the prophylactic measures, right? Kind of the idea that if you set up the really thriving communities, the safe and supportive schools that – you know, if your community is your fundamental unit of operation – is that Angela Y. Davis instructs us to think about your life, you know, as opposed to the individual being the unit. If you have these strong communities and you can avoid, through that collective action, some of the worst forms of the state, right? And I think I'm still grappling with it, right? There have been bills entertained in the 2023 legislative session in Texas that would, you know, give air conditioning to folks in prisons in Texas, right? And so you're kind of thinking the entire time, you don't want these human beings to suffer any more than they already have, right? But then, like, so much political capital is expended on like, Oh, if we improve the conditions of the prison, that will be the primary victory. And I don't at all want that to be [00:10:06] the conclusion or the takeaway. So yeah, this is like a very long-winded response to say, you know, I kinda take it day-by-day, week-by-week, right? Like even as a proclaimed abolitionist, I'm always kind of grappling with like – am I actualizing the principles in the best way that I can? And you know, I'm human, so it's imperfect.

KIRSCH: No, I mean, that was such a great answer and I mean I am not gonna pretend that I have, you know, the answers on how to walk the line, you know, by any means. I mean, you know, I have a ton of respect for everybody who, you know, even, even people who are, you know, trying to, you know, make prisons, you know, hurt less and of course, you know, we need to get rid of them entirely. So you know, you know, a ton of

respect and it's not, it's not easy. I want, I want to circle back to the way – I think it's fascinating the way that, you know, you were talking about kind of all the different interactions between like different aspects of your life. And I'm curious if you like how you think about being like an organizer, activist, lawyer, and a man of faith. And if you see things, all of those things, as kind of one, one thing, or if you think about them in different ways and just the way they interact. I'm yeah, I'm curious. I don't know how you, how you think about all of that?

HAIRSTON: Yeah, I appreciate this framing. I think of it as one grand thing, right? I think that my inheritance from my parents, these two black Southerners. My mother was born and raised in Louisiana. My father was born and raised in North Carolina and in black Baptist churches in those communities. And they instill those principles in me and my sister very much so. Even when I was a child, I felt that the ritual was kind of standing in for the actual spiritual experience of a church. You know, I felt a deep connection with these older black folks, younger black folks, who I would see in these churches in North Carolina and Indiana and Missouri and Ohio and ultimately DC, Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, right?

For a while, I guess as I kind of considered, you know, [the] wisdom of organizers, like Grace Lee Boggs or Adrienne Maree Brown, that like you transform yourself in the service of this new vision of the world. I got nervous when I was a teenager, probably was even like 11, when I realized that yeah, I was attracted to multiple genders and, you know, that idea that I was attracted to men (laughs) felt like so much of like a barrier to this, at that point, growing line that if you are a person of faith, like that is not something that you engage in. And so probably for about 15 years of my life, I was having these deep philosophical internal discussions with myself. Like can the person of faith, man of faith part exist with this, like growing, organizing appetite of mind, like activeness spirit? And I got to the age of 26 and, you know, told myself the answer internally and externally that absolutely they can, right?

And at that point, in my late twenties. I was 26 when I came out, 27 when I came out to my family, and uh, even more friends. I thought, well, I've got to step back from the man of faith part of it, right? I'm not like completely divorcing myself away from it, but I do want [00:14:17] to address this part of myself that had not been fully nurtured by me for a long time. And in that,

probably, you know, several-year period, right? 2018, I came out; 2019, I moved to Austin. In 2019, I joined this historic black Baptist Church that I attend and am now a deacon of, and I think, in a sense was still kind of going through the motions like early on because I felt nervous that my congregation might, you know, learn this about me and then I'm kind of (laughs) you can't get pushed out of a black Baptist Church. They're like, you know, it's all volunteer based and if you pay your money, you know, you'll be good. (Laughs) Still felt nervous, but then I got to a point in 2022 where, after my first electoral run for Justice of the Peace in Travis County, which I'll talk more about, and my complete onboarding to Austin DSA, and my deep involvement with the church – all of these things converge where it's like not only are these things like absolutely, inextricably linked, right, but they are like building on each other to make me the most effective organizer I can be, the most caring man of faith I can be, and um, could not do one without the other.

And I'll end the answer to this question and say that, I primarily view my organizing or my community engagement as a two-pronged thing, right, where I'm a very proud member of Austin DSA and have been since 2021, but then also am a proud member of Ebenezer Third Baptist Church and have been since 2019. And you know, this kind of ongoing effort is to bridge [00:16:06] the gap between these intergenerational relationships with black folks that I – that are life-giving to me, right, and the radical vision of the future that is presented by my identity as a socialist or Democratic Socialist, right. And to know that presently, it's no secret that DSA might struggle on race issues, right, and having a number of folks of color in the midst, right? And then socialism has been pitched as the boogeyman so effectively. When I was at the Texas Legislature, this morning preparing to testify 2:30 in the morning, I sat in the house gallery and then an amendment was offered by a Republican – one of the bills that, that or you can't talk about communism, Marxism, or socialism in the curriculum of K through 12 is like, literally, (Laughs) literally, the identity is bad, right? And so, I think the – my life's work, right, for the next 50 years, I'll be trying to, like, bridge the gap that like socialism absolutely belongs to these black people who I love, right, and that certainly black folks belong in socialist organizations and have always used collective care to make it through the oppressive systems of the United States. But you know there doesn't have to be that necessary gap between the two institutions.

KIRSCH:

That's incredible. And yeah, I mean there's kind of an interesting little bit of a parallel with my life, to me, not to the same degree at all. But I mean I was raised Jewish, you know. My parents were quite involved in our, in our synagogue. And you know I kind of was – I mean I was raised in it. I became a bar mitzvah and I kind of was like, Okay, I'm not so into this. And over time I've kind of started to circle back around to it and of course also like recognized in history a [00:18:06] tradition of pure socialism and solidarity, and I mean I think a lot of that to me seems to there is, there is a, you know, religious, and, you know, textual, you know, root in that. But I think a lot of it is from, kind of, a history of oppression and having solidarity and being part of, you know, the community as also something of like a survival. And – but I'm really interested in hearing your perspective about, you know, being a socialist and bisexual and the role of the deacon at your church and IN the community. You know that that is there in East Austin, where you also reside in because I think a lot of people kind of have this perception of, you know, like a Black Baptist Church and, and you know, Oh, there's these people that sound, you know, they're really eloquent speakers and there's this community. But I don't think people – a lot of white people really understand what kind of the importance of Black churches are in the community and just really interested to hear about how you like you know, see yourself and the people that attend there and, you know, your kind of how people, you know, see you as you know somebody who may on paper be like an outlier.

HAIRSTON:

(Laughs) Very much so. I'm like every six months I present something to my parents like, you know, What's new, what's new with you? You know? (laughs) They'll probably find this on the Internet, you know, this is right before I tell them that I'm polyamorous, right? What is that? (Laughs) Where did you come from? (Continues to laugh)

So I'll start with the bisexual identity. That move to Austin, and I was somewhat confident in talking about it – [00:20:15] but I was still semi-private about it. I would not lead with it in 2019, right? But in the right social circumstances, I would not be opposed to talking about it. And so I joined – I moved to Austin [on] June 14, 2019 and joined Ebenezer Third Baptist Church on June 30th, 2019, right. So it was very quick, and was kind of grappling with that in my mind like, you know, I'm not going to hide it, like everyday I feel more confident in my identity and feel like I'm

on a path, right. It's ordained by God, right, to be a bisexual guy in this old Reconstruction-era church.

Then the pandemic occurred, right. And for so many reasons, right, just like, was focused on that community care. I went to Oklahoma City for about nine months of the pandemic on and off to support my parents and my sister and my niece, who was born in 2020, and, you know, it was a two-way road, right. They provide support as I provided support and had this collective infrastructure during the pandemic. And I got back to Austin permanently in 2021 and was just kind of thinking about like, should I go more public with this aspect of my identity? What should my relationship to talking about it be, right? For a number of factors that may go into a little bit later on in this interview, I felt very empowered going into like the late summer, early fall of 2021, and tweeted out my bisexuality Labor Day 2021. And whew, man. (Laughs) Blocked my parents and sister from my – I'll get into that more, right? I was, I was pretty nervous across the month of September 2021, (laughing) like, you know, it's all good til the tweet is sent. And then, you know, 500 people have seen [00:22:15] it on your Instagram story. (Laughs) But I also use that as an inflection point to say, Well I have felt, for whatever reason, drawn to say it at this point, right? And there is no turning back, right. So, lean into it.

Um, I continued serving in my church, attending regularly – kind of with no expectation around it, right. Like if folks brought it up, I would address it, but, you know, it's not a concern. And I really put all of my energy into my Austin DSA organizing, primarily through my first campaign for Justice of the Peace, which ran from November 2021 to March 2022. After I lost that race, I again kinda turned back into my community of faith and just focused on church service. And, you know, started to get some pings from the chairman of the deacons, right, and say, Hey, I'd really like to get coffee with you. I'd like to touch base. I'm like, Damn, he figured it out. (Laughs) It was like, If you come you need to sit in the second part, you know – we can't see you, (laughing) it was like we can't restrict you from coming, but like, please, please don't bring all that noise here. And ultimately, in July of 2022, he asked me, he was like, Are you interested in being a deacon? This is not quite what I expected him to say to me, right. In retrospect, it seems like the only thing that you would've approached me about, right? The chairman of the

deacon's asking me after seeing my regular service and attendance at the church is like, Yeah, be a deacon.

But I had built this narrative in my mind, right, that, you know, the two couldn't quite exist together, and I gladly accepted, right, and was ready to tell the deacons and the pastor about this aspect of my identity. [00:24:15] It ended up being – so my cohort was alongside two guys in their 70s, and, you know, I cherish that training and those relationships with those guys and got to maybe like the third session, maybe like September 2022, and the pastor's instructing us on the deacons' family, right. Deacons could be married, they could be single, they can be divorced, all these things. We – our cohort represented all, right, single, married, divorced. And after that session, my pastor called me into the study and he's like, Andrew, would you like to talk about your personal life? And I'm like, Oh, this is it. I'm like, Yeah, Pastor, I'm bisexual and I don't hide it from anybody. At this point, [I] been out publicly for a year. And he's like, Yeah, I knew when I asked you to serve and, you know, I'm training you so that should give you a sense of how I feel about it. But let's try and like walk it through, right? This is a 147-year-old church. There might be particular views about that type of social issue, so we can try and gauge with it but you know, I'm training you regardless, right.

So I am ordained on January 29th, 2023, right. It was the most beautiful and transformative service. My father and I have talked about this quite a bit. It felt like one of the most spiritual church services that we've attended. And it just got to work. There was, in late February, a moment (laughs) – I've kept a WordPress site since 2014 where I archive a lot of my writing, both fiction and nonfiction. And in that website, you'll find the descriptor of me, right, as I started this interview – writer, civil rights lawyer, bisexual man, and then when I became a deacon, I added, Baptist Deacon, to it and then that created a stir (laughs). [00:26:15] In February of 2023, where like the deacons, you know, like so many folks had access to [the] internet and, like, saw that I posted about these things, like, very closely to each other. And, um, not to get into the, like, gory specifics of it, but they were like, Okay, let's find a compromise where you are comfortable talking about who you are, but also like maybe, Baptist Deacon, doesn't have to appear directly by proud bisexual man. (Laughs) I'm like, You know what? Y'all got me. I'll take off that just deacon, not bisexual man.

So, Sam, it has been the most, kind of, gratifying period of my life, but I don't want to minimize the incredible loss that we have collectively endured during the pandemic. But my life really from 2021 on – where I came out, right, and, like, reconciled these aspects of my identity that felt like they created dissonance but ultimately created convergence, right. It's like all the things exist together, right. I'm like a better deacon because I'm bisexual. I'm a better parishioner because I'm a socialist, right. Like, you know, I'm a better uncle and brother and son because of all of those things, right. I'm a very non-judgmental person because I know, (laughs) I know how lonely it can be being a bisexual, socialist, prison abolitionist working in 2023. So, you know, if you need to like (laughs) vent to me, you know, I'm your guy, you know, in whatever community I find myself in. I'm just like grateful for how it's all worked out, right.

KIRSCH: That is, that is, you know, such an amazing answer. And it to me, the what, like, what I'm really getting from it is just how [00:28:15] compassionate it makes you, and I want to touch on, you mentioned you know, your run for Justice of the Peace. And one of the things that I loved about your campaign was the centering of, you know, doing everything that that seat could do to slow down and to stop evictions. And I mean, you know, I always get frustrated with the fact that I don't think that we talked enough about how, you know, evictions are violence. I mean, they're violent, I think, you know, not only in the way that they happen in terms of actual process of, like, if you have to actually physically kick somebody out but what the conditions are that you have to live in, and yeah I mean – I don't, I would just love to to hear your perspective about just the importance of, you know, slowing and stopping down evictions and how that kind of you know, if that, you know, had a role in inspiring you to run or just, yeah, I'd love to hear your perspective.

HAIRSTON: I'll recount my history with DSA a bit more, as I started this answer right and I'll be like very forthcoming just as I was and reformist in 2011 around like police and prisons. I was a two-time Hillary voter in 2016. I thought that Bernie was a crotchety old man, you know, (laughs) [inaudible] I'm like, you know, Just buckle in for the rest of your twenties, Andrew. You'll see how you'll transform.

And so I got to Austin in 2019 and attended the Rodney Reed rally in October of that year and met a comrade, Mike, from Austin DSA. We grabbed a couple of coffees before the pandemic and then kind of fell off, of course, because of the pandemic for about a year. But then we reconnected in 2021, and he's like, you know, Hey Andrew, what's up? How you been? Honestly, I'll be real with you, the *Washington Post* [00:30:15] profile [of] the Justice of the Peace in your precinct, in precinct one of Travis County. It was a pretty unflattering article in this national media outlet about how she's [conducting] off-camera during court proceedings and is inclined to evict folks from their homes, right.

And, uh, this might be a deeper reflection and subsequent answer, but, like, so many things in my life, like kind of that reverence of my parents had mentioned, right? But I was very unaware of how money worked up until the point I was like 22 years old. I was like, Oh, I think we're rich, because, you know, my parents like have provided so much for me and like got [to] give me what I want, both what I need and what I want, right? And so I approached it kind of thinking of like the material benefits I've had through my family and through my life. But also as Mike and I were conversing in 2021 about this WaPo article, about the evictions that were assumed to have resumed after the CDC moratorium expired in 2021. I'm like, Damn, absolutely. That's the framing that evictions are very violent, right. That, you know, the pandemic has showed us that there is the possibility of a social net, the U.S., right. Direct cash assistance, like mass vaccination campaigns, rental assistance, and the pausing of evictions. But soon the capitalists come, and they want their money, and they're like, We're getting it at a cost even if it means violently pushing you out of your home during the pandemic.

And so, I started to think about it more. I brought it to my parents and sister and to some extended family members, this idea of running for Justice of the Peace. And when Mike and I began our conversations, [00:32:15] the framing was that the judge was going to retire after per term expired in that, you know, as [a] successor would need to step in anyway. Pretty much the only outreach I had to do before the race was through the Texas Bar website [say,] Hey, Judge Williams, I hear that you're retiring. I'm a young lawyer and am interested in the role. And then, like right after that, she was like, Actually, Mr. Harrison, I just decided to run again. I'm like, Sure enough. (Laughs) At that point, Mike and I have been talking for about two and a half

months, and we're like, Hey, we've been discussing this so diligently. Like we might as well, right? Bernie was also 30 years old. So think of it – five years, right? From 2016, I'm like Bernie Sanders is like yo, messing up the machine in the wrong way, right? And now I'm like Oh, in 2021 Bernie Sanders ran when he was 30 years old as well you know, he could be a model.

So I approached it as housing as a human right for my campaign. And we also wanted to be kind of scrupulous with the legal language, right, that like at first, we said no more evictions rate and that got a little tricky. Mike was very good with me on the messaging, right? Like, Okay, Andrew, like there's going to be some reporter or some constituent is like, Is there any circumstance when an eviction can occur, right? I'm like, Uh – Let's reframe this in the affirmative to say that housing is a human right, you know. And I was very grateful for that four and a half month period, or three and a half month period, where I got to knock on thousands of doors, in east Travis County and just hear from folks, folks who were very drawn to the message of housing as a human right. They were also drawn, [00:34:15] maybe more so at times, to dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline. Justices of the Peace in Texas handle truancy proceedings from the local independent school districts that come into the courts and in so many ways, truancy is the criminalization of poverty. It's an entry point to the school-to-prison pipeline for a lot of folks, right, because you're feeling all of the stressors bear down upon you. And as I talk to these folks from door to door, they're like, Man, housing is a human right, dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. We're absolutely on board with that message. Ultimately, I got 3,300 votes in that election. The incumbent got 12,000 but every one of those thirty three hundred votes, Sam, it's like DSA or I spoke with one of those 3300 people. I'm like, Damn, what a gift to be able to do that and to continue doing that.

KIRSCH: Yeah, absolutely, and I mean it's also, you know, just such a vulnerable state to be in, to – just to run for office. To put in yourself out there like that and just be engaged to the committed organizing. It's, I mean, it's inspiring for everyone in DSA. I know that. But I want to maybe shift a little bit to, you know, now your role with Texas Appleseed. Your titles, Education Justice Project Director, you know, you mentioned [the] school-to-prison pipeline and know that, like, in the Austin AISD, there are – and in many schools right there, they call them School Resource Officers, SROs. I saw a post from the

Austin's former APA president, you know, the infamous Ken Casaday posted about how there were these like retired cops that are now going to be going into [00:36:15] schools. And meanwhile, there are schools in the district that have at least one, if not multiple, SROs. And there are schools that don't even have full-time nurses. There's nurses that are basically rotating between schools. So I would – yeah, I would just I would love to hear your experiences, you know, engaging at the some of the, some of the bills that are up at the state leg [legislature]. Also just kind of what you see, as some of the like – what are some of the lower hanging fruit kinds of solutions and alternatives that you see that are just kind of like we can and we know how to implement these things, we just need the political will to do them?

HAIRSTON: [37:03] Yeah, I'll talk a little bit more about my career, and I alluded to it earlier – so as I was going through law school, I shifted and interned at Advancement Project. I mean I knew that I wanted to be a civil rights lawyer. I was open to the area of advocacy within civil rights work, right you know, voting rights or housing justice or education justice. But what ultimately landed for me is that I am the descendant of educators. Ultimately, my grandmother was a seventh grade math teacher in Madison Parish, Louisiana for over 30 years, and my mother is presently an assistant principal in a middle school in Oklahoma City public schools. At some point, I intend to be a classroom teacher, right. Maybe when I'm 45 and older. And so, I think that kind of naturally germinated for me. As I knew that I wanted to be a civil rights lawyer, education causes felt like something that could be drawn to. I also substitute taught for a few weeks in the summer 2015. (Laughs) I'm waiting for the day where the legislature is like, What do you have [00:38:15] to say about education in Texas? You've never been educated in Texas, and you have never taught in Texas. I'm like, You got me. (Laughs joyfully)

So I did this work at a national level in DC. I started my career as a legal fellow at the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law and its educational opportunities project, did some litigation support on a federal desegregation case concerning equitable funding of the historically Black universities in Maryland, but also some parental engagement and outreach that was really great. And then I returned to Advancement Project as a staff attorney, where I was from 2017 to 2019, and supported their voting rights work on their power and democracy team, but also their

opportunity to learn team, which houses education work against school policing, primarily. And so that's why I really refined the politic, right, as I'm thinking about being a reformist against being an abolitionist, and like how all of these things kind of come together. It felt like that time in D.C. from 2016 to 2019 is where it really materialized and was able to flow. And then I took the job at Texas Appleseed in 2019 with this developed politic, right, that I knew that Texas would be a very challenging landscape to organize and do this work. But also, you know, if you can win the fights in Texas, you can win them anywhere, and that feels quite possible and motivating.

So at Texas Appleseed as you shared, I have been doing this work. I came in, in 2019 to 2020, I called myself the School-to-Prison Pipeline Project Director. A buddy of mine from law school joked about it, he's like, It kind of sounds like you're fighting to erect the school-to-prison pipeline. I'm like, You're not wrong. (Laughs) So a few months into the pandemic, I expanded [00:40:15] the role to be Education Justice Project Director, and not only be fighting the draconian, harmful institutions, like school policing, but putting forth the affirmative vision of the safe and supportive school environment for kids that they deserve. And so, at that time that I shifted my title, George Floyd had just been murdered. And there was just incredible momentum across the country. We had scores of school districts reconsider their relationships with local police departments or with their internal school police departments. Even leading up to in June 2020, the Oakland Unified School District voting to disband its internal school police department with the George Floyd resolution. We recognized that there was an opportunity there – here in Texas, because the wave was unfolding, even if there would be, ultimately, some intransigence. So with the coalition of nonprofits, we sent layers to Austin ISD, Houston ISD, Dallas ISD and said, Look, you have multimillion-dollar commitments to your school police departments. What if you even took just a fraction and devoted to the actual material needs of young people? The nurses, the psychologists, the social workers, the counselors, who, even before the pandemic, you know, these professionals were lacking in Texas schools, but coming out of a pandemic, their roles have never been more important, right.

And so, the work has been multi-pronged, right. I do primarily local and state advocacy. I'm trying to find, you know, any window at this point in 2023 where a local school district will say,

Hey, you know, maybe even more rural parts of the state we only have a couple of school police officers on campus, like why we even feel the need to have school police in our insular community? I'm like [00:42:15] more of that interrogation. And then, my work also involves the legislature and engaging in that process every other year. During the 88th legislative session, it has been a lot of putting out fires. I think ultimately, as we're just three weeks away from his conclusion, I think we did as good of a job as we could have of, from preventing some of the worst shit from moving forward. But it has required a lot of I think, capacity evaluation for me, right. Where, you know, I appreciate the flexibility that I've had at my job, but I also understand even is again, as Dr. Davis pushes us to think of the community is the fundamental unit of society and not the individual. It's like, Oh, I am an individual person. So I, you know, literally if I'm up from 8 a.m. one day to 2 a.m. the next day, you know, probably need to take some time to recalibrate at some point after that period. But the legislature, especially in 2023, has given me the opportunity to build some coalition partners that have been wonderfully instructive and helpful and to try to mobilize some parents and young people across the state. I was trying to do it a little bit more on a broader scale than ultimately occurred. But hopefully as we go into the 89th session in 2025, get black and brown parents from Dallas and Houston and Lubbock and the Rio Grande Valley to come and tell their stories, right, and even if the legislature has gone past draconian measures, then you know, we're going to have 100 people show up and testify on public comment and what's the opposition.

KIRSCH: Yeah, and [00:44:15] I'm so glad that you talked about it. You know, the legislature in that context of like, I mean – it is, it is a marathon. I mean for the people that are really carrying a lot of the weight, you know, but I also, I mean, I do think that there is, you know, when like when you're talking about, you know, in 2025 like, you know, you know what needs to be done, you know that we need to get people from from across the state, to get organized with each other and, you know, kind of come up with a plan. Which I think exactly what the other side you know, has been doing, you know, it's I mean that, you know, in Texas we have, you know, it's a couple of months every other year and they just kind of push you know – the right ring just pushes everything through this as quickly as they can. And that's, you know, something that you know, organizers, you know, from the bottom up, you know, can do as well, just to do things, you know, right. And I, I think about kind of how such,

you know, we're in this very almost surreal moment with talking about police in schools in Texas. I mean, of course, there's the massacre in Uvalde and, you know, we saw recently in the legislature parents, you know, and families from Uvalde that had been, you know, coming to Austin to testify for very long times, you know, also very late nights, you know, as you're too familiar with. But, you know, and they were organizing around raise-the-age of buying assault rifles from 18 to 21, and I think, of course, you know, we have to think about, you know, we're talking about police out of schools – people really I think tend to have the mindset of like, Yes, I'm supportive of this. But what about, you know, if slash when there's a shooter, you know, of course we live in America, so it's going to happen. And it's just, it's such a kind [00:46:15] of surreal thing, but at the same time we saw what happened in Uvalde, and I do wonder how – you know if you have any thoughts about how or experiences in terms of like people that you've interacted with in talking about, you know, police out of schools, either with this like, Oh, but what if, you know, and, and it's but there's it's sort of this like limbo. It's like yeah you know they don't have an answer from what – And I can't imagine having, you know, an answer because of just what happened in Uvalde, what the, you know, reality played out. I'm curious what your experience has been with that, if at all?

HAIRSTON: Bear with me, as I for the first time publicly, try to toe this line. So, love and solidarity to the Uvalde parents and young people and community members who have had to grapple with this unimaginable loss over the past year. And good on them for coming so many times to the legislature to testify and say, you know, particularly on the gun control issue, We want action now. On my reflection of community care, I've been thinking about this deeply and especially the experiences of black people. But say, even from 1875 to 1950 in the United States, where it's, like, under domestic terrorism and lynchings and Jim Crow. How did we survive for that 75-year period? Collective care and self-determination, right. The communities are segregated. You attend Black schools, Black churches, Black universities. But you're also dealing with this constant threat of white domestic terrorism and it's like, you know, I'm not going to nab you for having a gun, right? I'm more of a pacifist. I don't have a gun. I don't intend to have a gun in my life. But, if Black and brown folks want to get guns [00:48:25] and say, you know, The road's going to get a little rocky here over the next thirty years of the 21st century – yeah, I'm not opposed to folks having the guns to take care of their community in the

way that makes sense, right. And so, I just generally don't wade into gun control debates, professionally or personally, because of that nuance that has to be developing that, you know, I guess the second Amendment does extend to everybody within the US borders, including Black and brown folks who've had to face so much violence on so many levels. And as I pitch this vision of a world that has not existed where prisons and police don't exist and where the full complexity of a human being can be acknowledged, that any person will do good things, do bad things, have a full life, right, and nobody should be minimized to the worst thing that they've done. As I'm getting to this vision of a world where these institutions don't exist, it's like, folks, want to feel safe, right. And I continually – and this has been the winning argument, I think, for DSA, both for issue-based campaigns and for the candidates who we've elected, that real public safety is Medicare For All, a quality public education, good union jobs. Yeah, you know, like the economic security in that way. But you know human beings hurt each other, right? And so I don't want to be ignorant of that reality or dismiss it when people come up and might have some questions like, If we don't have the police, who's going to take care of us? And again, I would push folks to evaluate that history, especially 19th and 20th century history for Black Americans, where it's like [00:50:15] you are in the face of so many deprivations – the deprivations of the protections of the state and of any extension of civil rights. Black folks made it happen among themselves, and every era of history has its moment. We're dealing with climate collapse, right. We'll have to lean into solidarity in support of one another in very material ways over the next 50 years, right. And I say with that in mind, do what makes sense for you, right, like, have that collective care, that community care, be your fundamental organizing philosophy. And if that means that, you know, somebody has a gun (Laughs) cool. I don't wanna hold the gun, right. But if somebody has a gun, cool, and let's invest on the front end in that, like community garden infrastructure, in the shared collective and cooperative economics, land co-ops, right, things that really do and have proven across history and make folks feel safe and to survive.

KIRSCH: Yeah, thank you so much. I mean, I love your framing. I mean, I, you know, really just the community care and it is economic, I mean, people too often, you know, try to separate, you know, race and economics. And it's, you know – it is just intertwined. And I mean, you know, of course, I mean slavery, you know, was about profit, right. It was about, you know, justifying, you know, demonizing a group of people in order to

justify being this other evil as a way to get free labor. And I think, but the context of now, you know, talking about community and as almost like a form of survival and security. And I think, you know, now people and I mean, I think for a long time, my impression is, you know, there are some black people, maybe I'm wrong that, but that kind of – or maybe it's just white people that think that, Oh, black cops are kind of the answer. And, you know, to me like I there's, there's a James Baldwin quote that that I love that just seems to capture it, you know, so perfectly and it's – he said, Black policemen were another matter. We used to say if you must call a policeman, for we hardly ever did. For God's sake, try to make sure it's a white one. A Black policeman could completely demolish you. He knows far more about you than a white policeman could, and you were without defenses before this Black brother in uniform whose entire reason for breathing seemed to be as hope to offer proof that though he was Black, he was not Black like you.

HAIRSTON:

Mmmm.

KIRSCH:

And I mean, I almost just want to sit with that, but it's just – it just to me just seems to cut through this myth that, I mean it's sort of like, okay of course if you grew up in a poor black neighborhood that you may not have had a lot of economic opportunity and maybe being a cop was kind of, you know, your way out. But then there is this kind of self-justification. But I'm curious how you take that and how if at all you have any experience with how, you know, any people talking about how, Oh well, maybe this is the answer because any other answer just seems so impossible.

HAIRSTON:

Thank you so much for sharing that quote. Forever grateful for black organizers and writers, like James Baldwin. Now contemporaries Mariame Kaba and my former coworker Derrica Purnell really push us to think, diversifying these harmful [00:54:15] institutions is not the answer that we are seeking, right. And I want to walk through that, like, very nuanced consideration that you just laid out, right. That I'm a young Black person born in the 21st century of America, you know, because of racial capitalism and the privatization of so many goods, you know, the thought is, I need to try and get mine and like get it as quickly as I can. And you know, a police job will offer some benefits to persons straight out of high school and kind of can create that stability but to really consider that deeper nuance, right. That

and this is, you know – I think I'll be in the South for the rest of my life or I think the rest of my life will unfold primarily across the three state range of Oklahoma, Texas and Louisiana, right. And as I do that, I'm thinking about the incredible Black communities that raised my parents and their siblings, right, in that my cousins and I found ourselves in my sister and I, when we were younger and presently and. You know, I very much open, see myself ending up in Tallulah Louisiana, where my mother was born and raised which is like very much so a majority Black community. But within that, you have like police officers and Black corrections officers who might work for the Louisiana Department of Corrections, and I definitely want to push folks to think about, you know, where have we gotten? All right.

So if we looked at the period of 1875 to 1950, let's look at 1948 to 2023, let's look at that seventy-five year period. What material collective gains have been achieved for Black people in that period? Yeah, Barack Obama. Yes, there's some rich Black folks. But collectively, [00:56:15] have the conditions improved for us? And so many of us, you know, me included, will tell you as we live paycheck-to-paycheck and have achieved all this education and have all these accolades. It's like, Oh damn, I'm still very nervous that the bottom is going to fall out for me at any time. So if that is our reality and we feel that nervousness, which so many do I know feel, then let's evaluate, you know, the further investments in these institutions.

We've seen the bipartisan commitment to law and order, and prisons and policing, right. We've seen Nixon. We've seen Reagan. We've seen Clinton. We've seen Obama in various ways and invest millions of dollars in the infrastructure and policing and prisons in the US. And we still feel that sense of nervousness even as we have survived, right, and to go back to that reflection, midway through our conversation of the black church, right. This incredible power of having this community based institution that's run by black people, run for black people, right. It's open to all races, but you know, the pastor is Black, the deacons are Black. You know, the various auxiliary Ministry leaders are black folks, right. And that's one way that we've gotten through. Really, we have to consider that, you know, here in 2023 in this inflection point of history, right, where climate collapse is here, right, where, you know, because of the privatization of so many resources in the U.S. folks are feeling squeezed in so many ways. It's like, how do we radically reimagine our relationships with one another to say, That doesn't have to be this, like two-parent,

two-child unit that, like, gets you through your life, right. I joked about polyamory earlier, right? But that is like a relationship structure that's making me further actualize my radical politics. When I'm like, you know, I'm very doubtful that I would be married, right? Cause – Like I already escaped, you know, like being a bisexual digging by the skin of my teeth. Like, Oh let me bring a man, a man into this congregation to marry, you know. I know I need to work it out with my therapist, right? But also the idea that marriage, right, this idea that I'm gonna marry this person and we're responsible for each other exclusively always weirded me out (laughs) and, look, my parents will celebrate their 33rd anniversary in July. I am grateful to my parents in ways I can't adequately articulate, right, and their relationship with me has been this life-giving resource, right, not only in my adulthood but in my childhood. But I very much want to push back that and that feels like reflecting on the Grace Lee Boggs quote, The transformation of oneself to transform the world. That feels like the way I'm trying to actualize. I will see if I'm successful. And I encourage other black folks that I think about it like within the context of that James Baldwin quote that you offered, right. Like, if you are a police officer, it's not too late to quit. (Laughs) You know, you can see the rot around you and be like I've not felt good generally since George Floyd or Mike Ramos or like so many people been murdered by the police right. Turn in your badge and come and organize with us and grapple with the difficult issues and know that we don't have all the answers, right. But I just know that what currently exists is not the answer.

KIRSCH: Yeah, [01:00:16] absolutely. And you know you touched on the idea of progress, and I think it's a really interesting conversation around – like, it almost to me seems like there's both a myth of progress and also a myth of a lack of progress in the same, kind of, sense. I mean, on the one hand, I always think about this really infamous picture of the Louisiana State Penitentiary, which is, you know, nicknamed Angola, and Plantation, The Farm, all that. And it's, you know – there's like two dozen young black men with farm tools and being basically you know led by like this white guy on a horse that you know is very clearly – not I mean not even an attempt to hide that it is still slavery and was founded you know. And it's just a continuation of slavery. You have that on the one hand. You have all of the, you know, Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 – the kind of change in mindset that people have. But that also, you know, yes, there were police reforms in many cities, also at the same time in

Texas, you know, there and in other states there was also backlash and there's also in addition to that at the same time, this kind of very, I mean, I don't know – I don't know if overcorrective is the word but this like you know, media, kind of like, corporate representation, you know, in advertising and media and in art, you know, I mean, you know, let alone the fact that, you know, these companies probably have sweatshops in Africa. But I'm just curious as to how you think about progress in 2023. [01:02:18] You know, is there nuance there? What are the nuances and all of that?

HAIRSTON: How deeply it undulates, right. So a very helpful point of analysis for me is my niece, right, a three-year-old child? You know, really is the joy of our lives, right? Addie. And I think about this child and the circumstances under which she was born, pretty much six weeks before lockdown, right. You know, the pandemic was here, though we didn't quite know it yet, and what a first year of her life, let alone first three years of her life. But seeing this child, this youngblood child – such great possibility and joy and hope. And to see where the like beautiful relationships I have with my parents and sister, even you know, as all four of us are human beings, and we argue and disagree and we have times where we're not feeling as much, right. To see Addie as a conduit of really the 26-year relationship that we've had with each other, with my sister being the youngest and being 26, it's like, Damn, we have been through so much. And this is again where all the points that seem dissonant come together. Like with these people of faith. Truly, when we didn't know how we were gonna move the assets column to the liabilities column – it just did not add up – we're still here, right? And we're still housed, and we're still able to provide support to each other.

And then, that collective care, right. My folks probably wouldn't call themselves socialists, but kinda thinking about how my aunts and uncles cared for me, older cousins, and church members across the U.S. and made me who I am. That's absolutely the socialism, right. When I think – when [01:04:18] I reflect on my sexuality I also think of it as like a limitless capacity for love, right, and I've reflected on that in public-facing interviews, before the like that limitless capacity for love. And like seeing how that spoke transformed our circumstances through the deep love that we've shared, right, my parents, and sister and me. And then we get to pour it continually into this job, and she pours it back into us right through her inquisitive and generous nature,

right. There's hope, right, and she's just one person, you know, right, now I put that on this one Addie, you know, live 100 years, kid, live to 2120 and just have like a really, you know, perfect life. But to see kind of the inheritance that we have received from our forebears and that we are trying to instill in her is a very helpful way for me to think about the long game, organizing them my life, and the idea that I'll never be done with my work, right. I'll die, the work will still be here. But you know, for this resource to exist, you know, for May 2023. I hope it is something that is encouraging and motivating. Waiting for the organizers who will come after me or who are alongside me, and yeah, I will continue to hold on to that hope because I had just seen that through my individual and collective experiences.

KIRSCH: Andrew you're, you are an inspiration to me. To a lot of people. I want to, you know – just one last thing I want to ask. I mean today, I don't know is there anything that you want that I, you know – that you want to touch on that I missed that I should have asked you?

HAIRSTON: In speaking of James Baldwin, I'm so glad that you brought it up. He was reflecting [01:06:18] on Langston Hughes on Twitter – some clip where he was talking about the loneliness that Langston felt, right, and these two Black 20th century queer men had very specific circumstances where I'm sure they felt, like, more affirmed and less affirmed in different aspects of our lives, right. I've kind of thought about that a lot recently when I'm like, you know, I'm so grateful for my trajectory. But, you know, I don't – I keep making the joke, I'm like, Yeah, I'm bisexual and polyamorous, it's just an elaborate way to say I'm single, you know. (Laughs) It's like, how many words do you use to say you're single, right?

And I'm human, right, and I was reflecting on this with a friend recently where it's like, yeah, you can have success in certain aspects of your life and feel like, other things you're lacking. But that kind of makes for the beautiful complex experience of your individual life and how it fits into the constellation. And so both for myself and for others who might watch this, right, like, maybe that's the piece of your life that's lacking, maybe don't have a romantic partner, maybe it's this, maybe that you want to like, deepen your organizing but you don't know where to start, right. I just know that all of us are contending with these issues in our own right, and that I think

the more that we can be open and share our struggles and kind of think through this as a community unit, right, and think about our work as collective care, we can – maybe not completely erase our concerns, right – but alleviate them in a way that lends itself to the collective unit, right. And to know that you absolutely don't do it alone, you can't do it alone. Nobody has done it alone, right, and that when I'm like sitting here acting, like oh you know, I have a partner right? Like I have [01:08:18] my congregation, I have comrades, I have my family, right, so many folks have shown me how much they love me and care for me, and that has been the most enriching, gratifying thing of this life. And, you know, I cannot wait to see where it goes.

KIRSCH: That's so beautiful. Where can people find you if they want to follow you? You mentioned your WordPress and I mean, and I just have to say, I always love checking out all of your writing.

HAIRSTON: Follow at your risk. I am Andrew R. Hairston on all social media. Yeah, by me, Andrew Reginald Hairston on Facebook and on Twitter and Instagram. I'm at andrewrhairston.com. I, you know, at this point, I've operated my WordPress from 2014 to present. I only have material from 2014 to 2022 there. I might add more eventually but I've recently in 2023 started Substack andrewrhairston.substack.com. And I think folks can see a little bit more, my current work and thinking through that medium. But I'm very grateful to have the archive WordPress, where, like, I've seen my evolution and seen where I agree with myself [from] nine years ago. And I follow back and feel free to shoot me a line through any of those mediums. I'm happy to chat about all these issues and more whenever.

KIRSCH: Andrew, thank you so much for talking to me today, always a pleasure, really, really appreciate you.

HAIRSTON: Thank you, Sam. Solidarity forever.

End of Interview