Texas After Violence Project
Interview with Marina Roberts

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ABSTRACT: Marina Roberts is a public-school teacher, union member, and community organizer living and working in Austin, Texas. During her interview, Marina discusses her work advocating for housing rights in Austin, Texas, specifically her campaign work to decriminalize houselessness in 2019, and her recent work fighting Proposition B, a ballot initiative passed in Austin on May 1st, 2021. Proposition B reinstated the camping ban that was repealed in 2019, making it a criminal offense to sit, lie down, or camp in public areas. This interview was conducted on June 23, 2021, in Garrison Hall on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin.

KEYWORDS: Housing, Proposition B, Prop B, Save Austin Now, Democratic Socialists of America, Unions, Reimagining Public Safety

MURPHY CARTER: All right, so my name is Murphy Anne Carter and I'm in the room with Jane Field and Amy Kamp, and today is June 23rd, 2021, which is a Wednesday. And we're here to interview Marina Roberts and I'm really excited to be here and interview you. And so, if just to start off, if you'd like to say your name, kind of like the roles that you bring to this conversation?

MARINA ROBERTS: Yeah, of course. So my name is Marina Roberts, I use she/her pronouns, and I am a public school teacher and a proud union member, and I'm also a community organizer. And I, you know, have worked on a variety of different issues, but chiefly housing, I would say for the last several years.

CARTER: And can you talk a little bit about what organizing and advocating for housing in Austin, Texas has been like for you?

ROBERTS: Yeah. So for me, the beginning of the community organizing work that I've done in Austin around housing has mainly focused on homelessness but the first campaign that I ever worked on, the first issue I ever worked on was actually the largest affordable housing bond in Texas history which was one in Austin. So that was work that I did through the Austin Democratic Socialists of America chapter. I joined that organization shortly after moving to Austin and not long after, became one of the co-chairs of the housing committee. And so we kind of mobilized around an effort to win a large, you know, as large as we could make it, affordable housing bond. And so we led kind of a boots-on-the-ground canvassing effort, and we were able to not only, you know, bring a lot of awareness and attention to that housing bond, but push up the number through kind of coordinated pressure. And, you know, advocacy campaigns to move council members to, you know, support a larger number. And then we were able to actually mobilize public support behind the ballot vote needed to pass the bond once we got that number set at a very high amount.

After that, just kind of the next campaign that focused on housing that our chapter became interested in and wanted to mobilize behind was a campaign to decriminalize homelessness. So that was an issue that was personal for me because I have a brother, who is unhoused right now. There was a lot of, you know, trauma in my family. And I think, you know, there was a connection between that trauma and, you know, a lot of experiences that he had. He struggled with substance use and he also just sort of had a number of mental health issues that he struggled with. And eventually that led to him just kind of disappearing from my Dad's apartment where he was staying at the time, and just kind of not returning. It's a complicated story and there's a lot of pain around it for my family. But for me, because of the fact that I don't know right now how to help my brother, I feel moved to do this work, right? So whenever the opportunity came up to work on an issue around homelessness, and also to learn a little bit more about some of the politics that unhoused people have to navigate, I felt really moved to do that.

So, should I talk a little more about Prop B right now?

CARTER: Yeah, sure.

[video cuts]

So essentially at the beginning of that particular campaign, the situation in Austin was that there were a number of ordinances, local city ordinances, that kind of prohibited behaviors that were unavoidable to people who were living on the street, right? So what those were the No Sit No Lie, ordinance, which prohibits sitting or lying in public spaces. The No Camping ordinance, which prohibits, you know, resting or living in public spaces with your possessions. So That can be a person with a backpack, that can also be a person living in their car. There's actually a wide variety of situations that that encompasses besides, you know, visibly camping with a tent, right? And then, the last one was the No Panhandling ordinance. And so, panhandling is flying a sign at an intersection asking for help, really any kind of public ask for help that you can make is kind of covered by that ordinance. And in theory, it sort of polices aggressive panhandling, which is, of course, who gets to make that distinction? The police get to, you know, get to interpret what is and isn't aggressive. And in practice, the only people who are ever, you know, cited by any of these ordinances are overwhelmingly unhoused people. And the reason for that is that if you are unhoused, you don't have options that aren't these behaviors, right? If you're trying to survive, then you do have to ask for help in order to be able to afford food or other things that you might need. You do have to sleep outside because there are no places that you can go that are not public places. You don't own private property, you don't have access to private property of your own. So the public spaces are the only spaces that you are allowed to inhabit.

And I think that what a lot of people don't understand, just as a starting point for this, is that all of the shelters in Austin are full and have been for a long time. So, if your knee-jerk response to the things that I'm saying is, Well, what about shelters? People can go to shelters, the answer is absolutely no. People cannot go to shelters. There's a long waiting list, you know, to access even those spaces. So, you know, it's a fraught issue. And so Austin DSA, in coalition with a number of different groups, especially groups focused on housing like Mobile Loaves and Fishes, Texas. Housers, there were a lot of, you know, Texas Appleseed. There were many different groups that kind of came together to rewrite these ordinances so that people weren't being targeted by virtue of being unhoused, right?

Essentially, the cycle that we wanted to disrupt was this cycle of criminalization. And so if I'm an unhoused person, if I'm an unhoused person and I'm living on the street, then if I am outside because I can't, you know, get into a shelter bed and I don't have any other options, a police officer an APD officer can come to me and say, Hey you have to move. and then I can ask the question, But where can I go? And they're not going to have an answer to me. One of our, you know, we were also in coalition with currently unhoused people or formerly unhoused people, and one story that I heard was that someone was in that situation, where an APD officer approached them and they asked that question, they said, But where can I go? And the APD officer instructed them to hide better. That was the advice that they got. That's what they were told to do. So eventually, you know, sometimes people just say, Well, like if there's nowhere else I can go, then I'm not going to move. And then they do get cited with a ticket sometimes.

You know, frankly, we understood that APD wouldn't really properly enforce these ordinances even the way that they were written, and they would just give people tickets without giving them adequate time to move. It was like I said, very much was left up to the discretion of officers and a lot of the time, they did not enforce these things in a way that gave people a lot of breathing room which is unsurprising.

So like I said, if I'm unhoused and I get a ticket, I'm not going to be able to pay that ticket, right? So maybe that turns into a court date and then I have to go to court and then I'm not able to transport myself there because I don't have bus fare, I don't have transportation, and then that court date turns into a warrant for my arrest and then I'm facing jail time and a criminal record that I maybe didn't have before. And that criminal record can be something that bars you from future housing or future employment opportunities. You know, this is in a context where approximately 25% of unhoused people are already working jobs. So you know, we assume that that's an issue that equally affects everybody and it's not. But if I am not currently working and I'm trying to get into stable employment, then this is something that disrupts that. This is something that prevents people from getting employment, that erects one more barrier to people trying to exit homelessness and enter, you know, stable housing.

So basically, it was just this very stupid cycle where people, you know, our city was investing money into trying to police these behaviors and locking people in this cycle. And it's really frustrating because there are better ways to spend that money. Like most of the time whenever we're using policing and enforcement, especially of ordinances, these are, you know, really not possible for me to abide by if I am unhoused. You know, there are going to be more effective ways to spend money, spend resources and help people by getting at the root of the problem, you know.

So for example, we could just shift that money away from policing and towards permanent supportive housing, and dollar for dollar, that's going to be a more effective response. Studies back this up, research backs this up. Money is more effective if you spend it targeting the root of the problem. So that's what we were trying to do. And we actually were able to mobilize. We, you know, launched a door-knocking campaign. That's the work that I was doing through Austin DSA. We were in coalition with a number of other groups, but DSA was kind of leading the boots-on-the-ground, knocking on people's doors and talking to them about this issue, in order to implore people to, you know, contact their city council member and try to move them to support decriminalizing homelessness.

And we were able to win that vote at city council. I was one of the people who testified that night along with several people who are unhoused in our coalition, people who worked at Mobile Loaves and Fishes, people who, you know, have seen this issue from a number of different perspectives. And I think what happened after that was just something we weren't really, you know, prepared for. We didn't really anticipate the basically coordinated backlash. That was the response to unhoused people's lives being made just a little bit less miserable. What we saw was the Austin Police Association, the Downtown Austin Alliance, a lot of right-wing, you know, Republican politicians and figures, just kind of coming together in what honestly felt like a coordinated disinformation campaign where a lot of fear-mongering was happening. Misinformation, blatant misinformation was being spread by people whose job it is to enforce the law, right? So people who really ought to have understood what the law actually said.

And we were just kind of caught off guard by that, right. You know, we were just having to sort of, like, be all over the place trying to help the public understand that No, camping had not been legalized in people's personal backyards, that No, people were not allowed to camp in a way that was obscuring sidewalk access in such a way that a wheelchair user would not be able to use that sidewalk. There was just a lot of information that I think was being spread that was just blatantly false that, you know, as the ordinances were written, would never allow.

One really frustrating thing that a lot of people truly, truly believed, is that somehow assault had been legalized, right? That if you were an unhoused person and you were asking for money and somebody said No, And then you assaulted [00:14:04] them, that that was allowed. And that's always really interesting to me and a lot of the discourse around aggressive panhandling to begin with is interesting to me because, you know, we have laws that govern assault already. So you don't need a separate law that only comes down on unhoused people, right? That law, whether you're housed, unhoused, whatever your status is, you can't legally assault people. So it was just, it was a really frustrating time and we kind of thought that there would be like a hump and we would get over it. We would muscle past it and we just had to have some resolve and I think what we didn't anticipate was that the hump was going to last like two years, you know? So for the entire two years, following homeless de-crim, we were, you know, continuing to correct misinformation and then having to sort of beat back these attempts to undo the work that we had done.

So, Save Austin Now was an organization that kind of cropped up in that time, and their chief goal was to undo that progress and recriminalize homelessness in Austin. So they launched campaigns to collect signatures where, like, I personally watched their paid canvassers and their volunteers who were collecting signatures lie to voters' faces, and completely misrepresent what their petition was about. So they were telling people that they were collecting signatures in order to help unhoused people, to give them access to clean water and to get them access to housing to get them into housing and off the streets and out of tents, right. So playing on people's sympathy, you know, playing on the fact that they understood that people look at folks in tents and feel some righteous indignation because people shouldn't be living in tents right? People should be living in housing, which I wholly agree with, but this organization wasn't trying to do that, right? This organization was just trying to send us back in time to where these people were being chased around by police from, you know, creek bed to creek bed and from place to place, that was an unsafe place for them to be.

So, another thing that I need to kind of mention here, that I need to contextualize, is that these ordinances that we rewrote were killing people. These were ordinances that, you know, that did kill people who were unhoused, who in attempt to avoid citations and tickets that they couldn't pay, and jail time and criminal warrants and you know, criminal records and things like that. They were hiding in increasingly unsafe places like creek beds, like storm drains. And what would happen is, you know, because those are not safe places for people to be, people were being victimized by assault and theft and a lot of other, you know, violent harms, and flash floods were drowning people. Whenever you force people into hiding, they're further away from the services that could maybe help them out of that situation, and they are more likely, they're at a greater risk of physical harm either from other people who statistically are usually housed and from people, or, you know, just from the elements, right? Like, from things that we can't control like weather. So, you know, all of that context was just completely irrelevant to Save Austin Now, like they weren't concerned about the safety of these people. They were concerned with the aesthetics of the downtown, and you know— I mean honestly, like trying to navigate whatever it was that motivated them has been very difficult for me to wrap my head around for the last several years.

But we were able to prevent them from gathering enough signatures their first attempt, which was not this summer but last summer. We just basically showed up, we drove around the city looking for them in

places where they were gathering, signatures outside of polling stations and just in public areas. Whenever we saw them, we would show up and peacefully talk to the same people that they were talking to. So if they approached a voter, for example, I would, you know, follow them at a distance and then whenever they were done making their spiel, I would just, as politely as I could, I would interrupt and I would say, I'm so sorry to interrupt—or I would jump in basically whenever they were done, you know. And I would just say, I am so sorry to interrupt, but I'm a homeless advocate and I'm asking for you not to sign the petition without doing further research. Because this petition does not help unhoused people, it actually hurts them and I'm happy to talk with you a little bit more about why that is.

And so you know, I mean, simple enough, you're just kind of giving another side of the story. There were plenty of people who signed that petition despite my presence, right? But there are also a lot of people who we were able to plant that seed of doubt where they were just like, Oh well this is a situation I've never been in, I've got you over here telling me not to sign this thing and then you over here telling me to sign it. I am going to do my own research, right? And I think, you know, especially the people who, who had already done their research. Once I explained what was actually going on, a lot of people were outraged, a lot of people were very angry because they were being lied to by this group, right? So it created a lot of like, very awkward situations, but obviously it was really important work because I just don't believe that Save Austin Now would have even gotten close to the number of signatures that they needed without lying to people. And I think that that was evidenced by the fact that after they submitted their signatures, I want to say more than a hundred people wound up contacting the city clerk's office to have their name removed because they had been lied to. I mean, I've never signed a petition that I then wanted my name removed from right? Because if I sign a petition, it's because I agree with it. You would only do that if you later found out that you had been misled as to the purpose of the petition.

During that counter-canvassing campaign, though, there is just a lot of like, I mean, like, it's enough foul play to be lying to voters en masse as your primary strategy, right? But it's another thing to be like doing a lot of the things that we saw them doing. They called the police on me three times, for showing up and peacefully counter-canvassing them and informing voters of you know, the reality of what they were doing. There was one woman who called the police on me and then told the police that I was snatching pins out of people's hands, and I had to sort of, like, explain to the police officers that I was not doing that. And then they just wound up parking their cruiser, and watching us and observing that I was not doing that. And so, whenever she called the police on me again, they kind of just didn't show up.

It was really weird. It was a weird, awkward situation. There were also two young men who I believe were paid canvassers that Save Austin Now had hired who essentially harassed me. I spent a lot of time whenever I was speaking to people talking about my connection to this issue, which is my unhoused brother. And then they, whenever there were no voters around, accused me of making my brother up, of like just fictionalizing this person in my life. They, you know, accused me of lying about him. They also made a lot of just really uncomfortable comments about my physical appearance and they did that nasty thing where they kind of oscillated between saying that I was like goofy looking and ugly, to then just shifting gears and talking about how, you know, they actually thought I was kind of good looking and just like, in a way that was very threatening, in a way that was very uncomfortable to be around.

There was a lot of just, you know, profound nastiness from these people. I remember the woman who called the police on me, whenever there were no voters around and she was walking toward her car. She looked at me and she asked, Does your brother have sex for his drugs? And I hadn't said anything about him, you know, struggling with addiction, not to her, right? Not around her. So that wasn't something that I had brought up and she just assumed it and then asked me that question, and it was really, really ugly. So yeah, I mean, just people who appear to really struggle with the whole basic human decency thing.

But we were able to stop them from gathering enough petition signatures to get on the ballot the first time. But then they came back and then they, you know, launched another second effort and then they were able to get enough signatures that time. And so then, we had another campaign where we were trying to just sort of reach out to enough voters and mobilize them to vote, in an extremely low voter turnout election, to vote against what was—it was called Proposition B. That's what it wound up being on the ballot. And in that work, we were, because it was unfolding during Covid, we did do a little bit of door knocking but, you know, it's a little fraught to do door knocking at a time whenever social distancing is being enforced, and we're trying to encourage people not to do that, right? So, we did a lot of phone calls, a lot of phone banks, a lot of text banks, we did do door knocking.

And that work was, it was interesting because the first time that we were knocking on people's doors, we had the benefit of nobody else had framed this issue for them already, right? We were coming to them and we were kind of informing them about these ordinances that most people didn't know existed. So we found that people were actually very, very receptive to, you know, understanding about this issue, learning about it, and people were overwhelmingly supportive of the idea that unhoused people should not be locked in cages for trying to survive, right? But the second time, because of the effectiveness of the opposition's misinformation campaigns, you know, like, people were a lot more resistant. Like we still found a lot of people were at least movable, like we were able to sit with people and talk to them and ask the right questions and empathize with where they were coming from, right? Because people are, you know, people have a lot of feelings about the increased visibility of homelessness. People have a lot of feelings about driving around and seeing people living in tents, you know, they, I think, correctly understand that, that's not good for people. But I think that what they didn't understand a lot of the time is that the alternative was much worse.

So we were, you know, hustling as much as we could and, you know, like talking to people and managed to flip a lot, a lot, a lot of votes, you know. Like, there were many, many, many people who we called, who are like hard Yeses on Prop B, who then became hard Nos on Prop B by the end of the conversation. It's just that the opposition raised half a million dollars, right? Their fundraising outnumbered our fundraising, like more than 10 to 1, I wanna say. And they were able to just kind of outspend us. One of my co-organizers, Seneca, was telling me that basically, this was like the Super Bowl for **ghouls**, you know? So they had been waiting for two years to cast this ballot and they all showed up on the first day of early voting, and they were like, really fired up and energized, they were really mobilized to go and do this thing.

And I think the reality is, if you're not unhoused and if you don't have a direct connection to unhoused people, like we are just fighting for the deep, deep underdog here. And I think a lot of people, because of their own vulnerabilities, [00:26:35] they don't want to identify with the unhoused person, you know?

And it's hard to mobilize people to go and fight for them. It's hard to mobilize people to go and cast a ballot just for that unhoused person. I think that building a sense of solidarity between, you know, housed, working class people and unhoused people is a big task, like that's something that we have to do and I've been kind of reflecting a lot on that since, [00:27:05] you know, since the vote happened because we did lose and Prop B did pass.

But, you know, I mean, none of these victories or defeats are permanent ever, right? In the same way that whenever they lost, they just kept fighting for the next two years and turned that around, that's what we have to do. And I think, you know, I think that we can learn some really valuable lessons from [00:27:35] the way that this whole arc has happened. And I think one of them is just that, you know, just kind of grappling with and recognizing the fact that even if you're a poor person you don't necessarily want to see solidarity with unhoused people, you know? Like you don't necessarily want to see a connection between yourself and them. And, you know, obviously, we need to have this conversation with many, many people.

But for me, the response to that is that of course you do, right? You might, you know, be [00:28:05] a renter who has your own apartment, right? But tenant protections in the state of Texas are threadbare. There are very, very few protections that you have against eviction, against a landlord just bullying you out of your home. Landlords put eviction notices on people's doors unlawfully all the time, right? Where a tenant has not actually violated the terms of their lease and should not legally be evicted from their home, but because the landlord knows that if they [00:28:35] just put an eviction notice on somebody's door, most of the time people leave, because people don't know their rights. And, you know, the landlord's work is just done for them. Even if you own your home, what you actually probably mean is that a corporate bank owns your home, you know? And if the right number of tragedies or emergencies or bad luck happens in your life, then you might find yourself in a situation where suddenly [00:29:05] your housing is unstable and insecure for you as well, right? And I think most people know that, most people just really don't like to think about that very much which is understandable because we're all, you know, we're also vulnerable whenever it comes to our housing. But really, you know, my point is that everybody only has so much insulation from catastrophe, right? Everybody only has so much protection from the circumstances that have made our neighbors on the street unhoused.

So I, you know, [00:29:35] I do wish that there was a little bit more recognition of that fact, not only so that we fight for our neighbors on the street, right? I mean that's very important to me but also so that we kind of fight a little bit more for ourselves collectively. We should have housing that is for people and not for profit, right? And right now, pretty much all of the housing that we have in this country is only ever constructed by rich people so that they can make money. It's owned by rich people so that they can make [00:30:05] money. It changes hands from rich person to rich person so that they can make each other more money, and they play our neighborhoods like a roulette table at a casino, you know? Like, gentrification is connected to this. And I think that if we rethink housing in this country, where we recognize that housing that is collectively owned, either, as a cooperative, where the tenants democratically run it, that's a better model than the one that we have right now, right? Public housing, I know that's a [00:30:35] dirty word, but that's only because of racism. There's this whole legacy of public housing originally being constructed for middle-class families, right? Just kind of for everybody. And then it becoming this racialized thing. You know, this idea of The Welfare Queen being so ingrained in

the American consciousness, like that was an invention, like that was something that right-wing white people politicians made up in order to turn us against each [00:31:05] other and to undermine the project of public housing.

As a public school teacher, I think that they are doing the same thing to public schools right now, that they have already very effectively done to public housing, which is, you know, you slash the funding, it kind of struggles because of the fact that there are not enough resources put into it to work really well. And then you point at it and you're like, Look, the government can't do anything well, we should privatize this, right? So it's a, it's a strategy for dismantling [00:31:35] public institutions. But actually, if our housing is collectively owned. If it belongs to us instead of being privately owned by rich people, then, you know, we can decide, Hey, we should fund that again, you know? Hey, we should put more money here. We should, you know, like the conversation that we're having about policing right now. Let's shift resources away from police chasing people around, and let's put those dollars into housing people and giving them access to health care.

So I mean, a lot of this is just, [00:32:06] you know, it's just about the political decisions that we make and I think it's about, you know, how much power we as working class people have, over the decisions that affect our lives. And I think most people in America just don't think of housing as a political issue. Very weirdly, like, we'll, you know, we'll talk about, like abortion or gun rights or a lot of other things. But our homes, for some reason, don't feel like political spaces to us even though they really, profoundly are.

[00:32:39] Yeah, I literally just talked for like, 45 minutes straight so I don't know—

CARTER: It was amazing and I have so many follow-up questions—

ROBERTS: Yes, let's, I'm sorry. I literally should have like stopped and checked in with you and been like, Hey, should you?

CARTER: No my face is, my eyes are wide open, I'm so engulfed. Just very much thinking and following all the threads that you're describing. And honestly, some of the questions that I was thinking about you naturally flowed and progressed and answered as we were going so.

ROBERTS: Okay, [00:33:09]

CARTER: There's so many things that we can touch on. And I guess one thing that I really want to make sure that I ask as well, since you're describing this panoramic connection, not only between politics, what it is to criminalize certain behaviors, housing as a political matter as well. And I would love to hear about the ways that you see public safety being construed between, you know, as you say, the opposition, and how you're talking, about how you would describe public safety [00:33:39] to someone if you were knocking on their door, those conversations that you had on the ground, and speak some more to that? And talk about kind of, the harms that you're describing in so many ways. And how you convey, you know, the alternate reality, the alternate world of public safety that is out there in the potential.

ROBERTS: My first response to that is that I think a lot of people have been taught to think [00:34:09] about violence in a particular way that I don't see eye-to-eye with, right? Violence—the way that many, you know, Americans conceptualize it—is, you know, broken windows in Ferguson, Missouri or something. It's property damage, it's like unruly behavior or something. And I don't abide that. To me, violence is whenever you are withholding something that people need to survive, or whenever you are, you know, deliberately causing physical or emotional [00:34:39] harm to a person, to a living thing. So for example, you know, an eviction is a violent act because you are taking somebody's housing that they need to survive, away from them, usually because you are motivated by profit. And you are leaving them with, you know, a vacuum with no housing and therefore, you know, you're putting them in a situation where they could be harmed.

[00:35:10] Whenever I'm talking to people about this issue and about, you know, safety, I just think it's hard to kind of like turn the conversation this way sometimes, because people are a little resistant to it, but I don't know how you have a conversation about homelessness without centering the people who are experiencing homelessness. And many, many, many people try to have this conversation in a way that does the opposite of that, right? Where the safety of those people is like an afterthought, like they're chiefly concerned with their perceived, you know, the perceived threat to their own safety that a poor person poses because of their assumptions that they have about these poor people. But for some reason, the safety of, like, you know, a woman who is unhoused who has to hide in the woods where she is at risk of being assaulted, that for some reason doesn't enter into the equation. So I definitely want to shift people's focus toward thinking about the safety of people who are actually most vulnerable in this conversation, right?

But I also just kind of, you know like, let's back up. You know like, if we're talking about public safety, what makes people unsafe? Like I'm, I'm not doing any crimes right now. I have a job that I love. I'm embedded in a community that I feel deeply rooted in. I'm supported by a loving family, a loving network of friends and colleagues. I have access to healthcare. I don't, you know, I can go afford to buy my groceries, I mean, like I'm not rich but I'm doing alright, like I have a pretty stable life. And so because of that I don't feel at all any kind of desperation that would lead me to do any crimes, right, to go and steal or to get involved in drug dealing or whatever, you know, whatever the case may be. And I think that what a lot of people don't understand is that if you lack one of those things I just described, if you lack health care, if you lack enough money to pay your rent, if you are in an unstable material situation, then like, you know, you're looking at these alternatives right where you're like, I don't have enough money. Something is coming down the pipeline toward me where I might be homeless or I might lose my job or something bad might happen to me, right? And that is actually inevitable if something doesn't change, right? Whereas, if maybe I go do this, you know, maybe I like, you know, get involved with selling illegal substances, maybe I get caught and I know that there are negative consequences if I get caught, but that's a maybe. This is a certainty, like this thing coming down the pipeline at me. So the appeal of those things is much more real whenever you don't have the things that you need.

So like my point is, the reason why we, you know, have identified for many, many decades, a correlation between poverty and crime is that poverty is the state of lacking resources, right? Poverty is the state of not having the things that you need to survive. So that's how we fix the problem. Like, I don't know—I don't, literally not rocket science, not actually very complicated. It's just a matter of political will and us

putting money in the things, into the solutions that we know work, into the things that we know are effective.

So, that's not going to happen unless people, you know, like regular working class people, mobilize en masse behind these solutions that are more effective, right? Like it doesn't matter that this is correct. It doesn't matter that all the science backs this up, none of that is like super super irrelevant. Because of the fact that people in power don't want to make these changes. So, all of these questions for me are chiefly questions of power, right? And in order [00:39:10] to, you know, mobilize people behind this vision, you do have to paint a vision, right? You have to like, talk about, a different world besides the one that we live in, where if you are struggling with substance use disorder, that's treated as, you know, a health care question and you're met with health care and support instead of punishment that exacerbates whatever trauma might have led you to turn to substances [00:39:40] to begin with, right? Traumatizing and re-traumatizing people who make mistakes or do something that our society's laws say is not allowed. That is just a way to kind of, like, take this spiral of violence and trauma and just keep people locked in it, you know, keep people spinning.

And I think that you are only able to disrupt that whenever you come up with something radically different than what we've been doing. And I don't think that we have to completely make it up, like there are other countries that have, you know, been more effective than America at this. Like we're actually the worst in terms of mass incarceration, we incarcerate more people than China. We incarcerate more people than a lot of—than any other country in the world I believe. But in Germany, you know, for instance, if you do get convicted of breaking the law and you become an incarcerated person, the experience of incarceration is very different from [00:40:40] what I understand. I'm not saying it's perfect, but you are treated like a human being. You have a key to your own cell so that you can feel safe while you are inside of it. You know, you're eating decent food, you have access to a computer, like the experience of being incarcerated is not what it is here, where routinely people are killed, where routinely people die because they don't have access to the things that they need, whether that be health care or I don't know, [00:41:10] a functioning AC inside the prison that prevents you from, you know, dying of heat stroke in the middle of a Texas summer.

So I mean I think to me like, that's just at the heart of a lot of these questions, Do we want to be effective? You know, like if you don't agree with me on a lot of this like on my philosophy, that anybody can be redeemed and everybody, you know, is capable of redemption, and we should like funnel people into pipelines of redemption and healing rather than pipelines [00:41:40] of punishment and retribution. If you just, don't agree with me about that, fine. You know, like, I don't, I would love to talk to you but we're not necessarily going to get on the same page about that. But I do assume that you're interested in effectiveness, right? Like we want to solve the problem. And what we're doing, just doesn't do that. What we're doing makes money for rich people because they can own prisons that, you know, generate a demand for prisoners. And they can own businesses [00:42:10] that profit from people you know lacking access to the things that they need. So yeah, I mean like, they are not motivated to dramatically change the system. But I would believe that at this point in time, many, many Americans either have or know somebody who has struggled with addiction, right? Like that's hit all of our communities in a very, very big way in this country.

I think that we want [00:42:40] better solutions, you know, I think that we want to stop locking people up for things like marijuana. I think that we want to stop, you know, punishing people for basically having a mental health problem that involves a substance and I just think that we have to understand that we do have the power to change it, like hope is a big part of this too. But we have to believe that there's something better that we can actually be a part of, and I think that's probably one of the harder things.

CARTER: And I think a lot of what you're describing [00:43:10] too, even when you were sharing that story about how someone who wasn't housed was told by a police officer to hide, you know, even the aesthetics of places, trying to hide folks. And what you're trying to do is offer, bring that out to the light, offer an alternate vision that kind of seeing as a potential way to be thinking about this and talking with people. And so much of what you've shared, even as a canvasser, or kind of as a counter canvasser or counter organizer. You are physically putting [00:43:40] yourself in the space to try and share that vision and make it seen. And I'm curious what it's like for you when you have a moment of confrontation, like you were describing personally.

ROBERTS: Yeah, honestly that's like—obviously it's great when you have a conversation with someone who's like, Yeah, I'm totally vibing with what you say. Like, I agree, that's awesome, because then we can just get to the like, Well, here's what we can do. Here's the action we can take together. But I actually really enjoy those conversations where somebody is pushing back and is making me articulate what I'm, you know, my vision a little differently, right? Because as a teacher, it's like, you know, I want to get better at that. I want to get better at meeting people where they are and just kind of like, learning how to articulate my vision in different ways so that I can reach the person I'm talking to.

It can be frustrating, right? Whenever people just kind of use arguments, that I know, like, I know where your argument [00:44:40] came from and it's coming from somebody who's either lying to you, or is deliberately trying to mislead you. And I'm frustrated that you have been like, caught up in that, that you've been targeted by this and misled by it. But I think it's important to not resent the person you're talking to, right? To just recognize that they have, unfortunately, been caught up in something.

So whenever I'm talking to people, I guess it's like I'm trying to think about that person [00:45:10] as being full of potential, right? Because we don't win unless we can, you know, move people. Like if everybody already agreed with us on everything then, you know, people wouldn't be disagreeing with me. And so it's like, I think that part of the task of winning any kind of radical change or major reform or any of that stuff is being willing to have those tough conversations. [00:45:41] And whenever you move somebody who used to believe the opposite view, you don't really know how far that impact can go, right? Like, not only have you just removed an illusion from somebody who was being led by and motivated by that illusion. But you might spark some indignation in them, right? Like when I get tricked, I get mad. I don't like that, and I think most people are resentful at being tricked and being misled. So whenever [00:46:11] you understand that something that you had understood to be true was a lie fabricated by people in power to mislead you, a lot of the times you actually get really motivated, and you're not just like, I'm going to go vote, like I'm going to spread the word. I'm going to be a part of, you know, getting rid of this illusion from other people too. You know, because I empathize with them. I was in their position once.

I think a lot about that, about like just the potential that you have to meet somebody, [00:46:41] treat them like a human being, and then actually get them to, you know, to become an ally, to become somebody who's like, in your camp fighting, doing the work that you're doing. So like, it would be easy to just focus on how those encounters can be frustrating. But I can't help but just like—mostly, those are the really, really good ones, right? Because it's sort of like the work that you did is, it feels bigger somehow, I guess. Like, you know, that [00:47:12] you're kind of winning in a different way I guess, because you're taking away from their side, which feels very good.

As far as like—am I answering that question the right way? Like is there anything else that you would like?

CARTER: Yeah, absolutely. No, and I'm so—'cause so much of the confrontation, too, and specifically with the other canvassers, or Save Austin Now, and so, when you were describing those instances, I was just really curious how it felt to be in that moment when someone's calling the police on you as well.

ROBERTS: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. That's—I mean whenever—any conversation that I'm having with a person where like, my opposition is right there and they're like the third wheel in that conversation? That felt less good. Just because of the fact that I didn't feel safe, you know, like I did not feel safe whenever I was out there, I had pretty real anxiety pretty much every day that I went out there and was [00:48:13] driving around. I was, like, hoping that I didn't see them, you know what I mean? I was hoping that I wouldn't find them anywhere. But then I did and then I would have to get out of my car. The first time it happened, there were three of their people in a parking lot and I was basically just running around the parking lot from one person's conversation to the next conversation, you know, trying to quickly but without seeming like I was in a hurry, have conversations with people and discourage them from doing it, right?

So I was like running circles around them which was good, but it was also just [00:48:43] really exhausting, because it was the middle of summer, it was very hot and then they—that was when they started getting ugly with me, you know? At first they were like, Oh well we're going to have a good time right? You know like, Okay, so you disagree with us but we're going to have a good time. and I was like, Not today, you know? And it was good though. Like I said, some people were just like, Oh nope, I'm going to sign that. Give that, give that here, you know.

So some people, there was nothing I was going to say that would change their mind. Like they showed up, they were primed to be in support of [00:49:13] that message, and they were just, you know, I wasn't going to win them. But then sometimes, I talked to one person, one woman, who, you know, she was looking at the canvasser and she heard what I said. She was like, No you're good. I know what this is about. If you need to go to one of these other conversations you can go. And then she like, she stayed to like, continue to engage with the canvasser and like, chewed them out basically. And then I heard her, like, walk over to the other canvassers because she saw them and she was just [00:49:43] just angry. She was like, oh God what did she say? She was like, you know, like, Y'all are just trying to lock poor people in jail, that's fucked up. You know, she was really angry. And then I just, like, clapped as she walked away. You know, there were moments of solidarity like that, where just somebody who kind of knew

what was up already would show up and you know, and that that was like me breathing a sigh of relief because it was like I didn't feel like the only person out there.

[00:50:14] And then like I said, I mean, just, whenever you do persuade somebody, if it's somebody who's literally got the pen in their hand and they're about to put their information down and you rush up and you're like, Look I'm so sorry to interrupt. You know, My name is Marina. I'm a homeless advocate and I'm begging you, please do not sign that without doing research. They're like, Whoa, what? Because you just said something different, you know. It's kind of like you just get immediate feedback and you're like, you know, whether it's positive or negative, [00:50:44] you know, you're motivated to keep going because even if it's like you talked to nine people and you only get one of them, that's that's one out of their ledger. And I actually found that the opposite was true. I would say like over half of the people that I talk to probably would have signed it and we got them not to. So we were, it felt like we were winning that first summer for sure. Like we were just, people were only signing because they were getting tricked. I know people personally who signed because they got tricked and people don't like getting tricked, so, [00:51:14] yeah.

CARTER: And also, I've been thinking a lot about the pandemic in particular. How in spite of the fact that this was like a two-year, coordinated effort as you described it, how the pandemic either maybe charged, influenced, changed? How that kind of created an additional layer on this fight that was already going on.

ROBERTS: Yeah. It just made the work harder, you know? Because our usual tactic is just knock on people's doors, go to where people are, you know? And then get a bunch of people together to go canvas, you know, but everything from getting the people together to go canvas to knocking on the doors to, like, a lot of the events that we might have had, like a fundraiser or whatever—tons and tons of that stuff all of it became more fraught. But I mean, I think that's just sort of like the work, right? Like at the heart of this are people who are living on the street. And so those folks were like, [00:52:14] having to navigate a pandemic where at the beginning, we were being told like wash your hands all the time. In what sink? You know, like practice social distancing. How? Llike me and my partner share a tent. Like how are we supposed to do that? You know? So very, very luckily we found out over the course of the pandemic that if you were outside you were actually less likely to either transmit or catch Covid, but we didn't know that at the beginning, you know? So I mean it was, it was, really terrifying to look at the prospect of unhoused people trying to live through this pandemic and survive.

I was hopeful that that would inspire a lot of sympathy and it did, you know, like I mean people were thinking about that, just sort of the struggle that we were all having from the comfort of our homes and then like, applying that to someone else and they were like, Yeah, that is messed up. We need to, like not do this during a pandemic, you know, like, we need to not stick cops [00:53:14] on poor people during a pandemic.

And I think that it just sort of—the trouble is that people have circles of empathy. You know, like everybody does, it's very rare to meet an actually empathy-less person. But there are just limits to some people's circles, right? And so my task as an organizer is to try to, you know, persuade people, convince people, to expand those circles to include [00:53:44] more people. Like, include people of color, include

queer people, include poor people, you know? Like all these groups that you've been taught to exclude, don't do that. And you can do that work successfully sometimes. And then sometimes, you know, you can't, and I think that Covid created conditions where, you know, people who already had pretty big circles of empathy were able to kind of push those boundaries and get them to include more people that maybe they just hadn't thought about before. But the people [00:54:14] who had already, you know, built a Trump wall blocking out homeless people, I just think getting them to dismantle that wall over the course of Covid, I don't know. I mean, I don't think that they had whatever experiences that they needed to have or connections that they needed to have in order to be, you know, be moved on that issue. I mean, some people are really, have really entrenched views, and if you feel threatened by poor people, then you're [00:54:44] not going to, you know, you're not going to very easily, expand your circle of empathy to include them, like, you're afraid of them, you hate them. And, you know, doing the work of questioning that and unpacking that is hard. Like it's difficult.

CARTER: Yeah, and you're describing navigating their motivations at the very beginning, and I feel like even that reflection is really difficult.

ROBERTS: Yes, still is. It's still, it's still hard. I think money is at the heart of it, right? You know, people want their property values to go up because they're so [00:55:14] wrapped up in their home value going up in Austin. It's like, that's your retirement. That's your whole plan. And so anything that you feel threatens that is like, a material threat to you somehow. I mean, I think a lot of it was just aesthetics though, and just hatred of poor people, that a lot of people have never questioned. It's hard to navigate. It's hard to really figure out.

Because I mean, like a lot of these people will get all defensive and will tell you like, No, I love, [00:55:44] I love homeless people and I care very deeply for them. I just think they shouldn't be sleeping under overpasses. Like, that's bad, you know, and they should be sleeping somewhere else, but they have basically zero interest in participating in that solution. So it's, it's tough to tell what is sincere and what is just a front that they put up so that they don't look as monstrous as their beliefs make them be, you know? It's tough. I wish I could really break that down for [00:56:14] folks but I don't know that I really can. Yeah.

CARTER: I have one more question, but I wanna check in, how's the sound with all this?

KAMP: I mean, I can still hear Marina here clear. [Laughs] It's not like it's overpowering you, it will just be there also.

ROBERTS: Okay. Okay.

CARTER: Is it okay if I ask you another one?

ROBERTS: Cool, yeah. For sure.

CARTER: And because you described being a public school teacher and kind of talked about that in terms of, how can you articulate your vision to anyone [00:56:44] and how can you change that vision

accordingly? And this was such a challenging year to be a teacher. And I really want to make sure that we ask the question of what was this past year like being a teacher? And how— even being a public school teacher, that perspective lends itself to so much of the work that you've devoted so much energy and time to.

ROBERTS: I feel like for that, I actually do want to sort of go back just a, just a few years. The first opportunity that I ever got to be involved with real community organizing was whenever I was living in Houston. So I was actually working as an international corporate tax accountant at the time, and I got involved with an organization called United We Dream and that is the nation's largest immigrant youth-led organization. So the people who taught me, you know, the community organizing chops that I first really got, were [00:57:45] undocumented teenagers in Houston who were advocating for their families, who were kind of mobilizing against, you know, the criminalization of their families, and trying to dismantle these pipelines that can connect an undocumented person to, you know, funnel them into deportation proceedings because of like running a red light or something, you know, or like cruising through a stop sign.

And [00:58:16] you know, I don't know, just sort of like, recognizing the power of young people, that was a really humbling experience for me and being taught by them was a humbling experience for me. Because I mean really, like, I went into those spaces fully understanding that they did not need me, right? Like I was there to support and to try to help out and really, to try to learn about their community and about, like, the work that they were doing, but they didn't need me. Like they had the power that they needed within their communities, [00:58:46] and that's where they were going looking for it, you know. And that was cool. Like that was a really cool group to be doing work with. And so you know, years later I moved to Austin, I joined Austin DSA. I kind of got acquainted with this analysis that, you know, kind of places capitalism at the heart of a lot of problems that we have in society that seem disparate but are really connected.

And I wanted to [00:59:16] stop doing the work that I was doing and start doing work that felt more meaningful to me. Because I was just, like, I'm only going to be alive for like, you know, who knows, who knows, how long I'm going to be alive? Let me do something useful. And so I wanted to be a part of the labor movement, I knew. And after many conversations with my partner and with other friends, I decided to be a public school teacher, because, you know, I think that I have skill sets that actually lend themselves to doing that type of work, [00:59:47] probably more effectively than the job I was doing, which didn't allow me to really lean on, like, the emotional intelligence skill sets that I built and the relationship building skill sets that I built, you know. Like people sort of, I think, particularly socialize women to think of that as like, Oh that's not like a real skill. You know. Like a real skill is coding but like, No that stuff's real that's a skill, you know, it's just undervalued.

And I guess I just sort of went [01:00:17] into it, like the timing just kind of worked out. I had worked on a Congressional campaign, just while I was trying to figure out what the next thing I was going to do was, and then that campaign ended, you know. We didn't win, but we did do a lot of community organizing and movement building work that felt good. And then I was just like, Well, I'm going to be a teacher, you know. And then the pandemic just kind of was like, all right, you know? I mean, it kind of just happened at the same time, so I joke with people whenever I explain that this [01:00:47] is my first year teaching

I'm like, Yeah, I have awesome timing, you know? But really it was very difficult. It was a really hard first year because all the things that make teaching so rewarding or, you know, like you got like a shade of that, you know, you got like just a really, you know, colorless version of it where like, I'm talking to a wall of blank screens every day, and I'm building relationships, you know, as [01:01:17] best as I can, but it's hard, you know. It''s much harder.

But the thing is, I got a lot of perspective, right? Like I was under the impression that teenagers couldn't work during the school day, whatever laws that govern that are not being enforced properly. And, I mean, I don't know what type of cockroach hires a kid in high school and schedules him to work during the school day. Like knowing full well, [01:01:47] that you were depriving that child of an education by making them come in and work, for often less than minimum wage. But there are plenty of those people and they're profiting off of, you know, the youth of often undocumented, underage teenagers. That makes me angry. I also just sort of learned—I didn't learn, I mean, I grew up in the Deep South but just sort of like, coming back into regular contact with [01:02:17] spaces where being queer is not okay at all. I've overheard parents just light into their kids, I guess, because they didn't realize that I was chatting with a student after our Zoom class ended, and I've heard just really ugly and just profoundly immature things be said, to young people after they were outed as being gay to their parents.

I mean, I—even with a lot of the challenges facing young people, I still feel like the hardest thing about my job is actually convincing young people that hard work is worth doing at all in any capacity. Because I think that they are just wise, you know, they're perceptive and they have access to more information than, like, any generation before them. And so, they're just not falling for it. You know, they're not buying into this idea that like, if you work really hard, you can become a millionaire, you know? Like [01:03:17] they're not temporarily embarrassed millionaires and they know it, you know, they're not, I mean they're starting to recognize that even going to college, which I really believed, you know, you go to college you are guaranteed, a good paying job and health care and all this stuff, like a stable life. They're like, No, I know so many people who went to college and that didn't happen for them, you know, they're just in a lot of debt and they can't even get a job in the field that they majored in. So like, why am I going to do that? You know? And, of course that's not complete, [01:03:47] you know, like all across the board true. If you go to college and you get a degree in accounting, you're probably going to get a job, you know?

But it's still just like, they're questioning a lot of stuff. And I think that you just have to help them understand, and what I try to do is help young people understand that, like, you can hustle for your community, you know, that you can work hard in solidarity with other people for something other than money, right? You can work hard, not just for yourself [01:04:17] and for your own piece of the pie or whatever, you can work hard, so that your community is better. And so that your community has things that your community needs, right? And that you, as a young person, you might think that you're like, you know, just like some relatively insignificant whoever person, but actually, you are uniquely positioned to be very, very important to the community around you because you know more about that community than anybody else does. And there's all these people outside your community looking in like, Oh, how are we going to help, we got to help these people. And you know better than any of those people, of those experts or, you know, people working in nonprofits or whatever it is like, you know what your community needs. And so whenever you step into the frame and you start fighting for that, you know, like you can you can do some incredible work. I think, you know, just getting young people to recognize the power that they

have because of their perspective, because of who they are, not in spite of who they are. But [01:05:17] because of who they are, you know, like that's you know, it's like the biggest challenge but it's also the most important piece. It's the most important thing. And I mean, like, there's so much stuff I could say about teaching. There's so much stuff I could say about the challenges and about like all the, you know, all the things I wish people had told me or whatever ,but like I think that that's probably the biggest one.

CARTER: And it's not just about hard work, it's also, you can't, even if the illusion [01:05:47] of hard work is being shattered slowly, you can't give up caring.

ROBERTS: Yes, yes.

CARTER: And that's something that I feel like you're saying and describing as well.

ROBERTS: Yes, absolutely. And you are a part of that, right? Like it's a whole body and you're like an organ in that. You have to also care for yourself because you're one of the threads going through your community and you need to be well, right? Like you're a part of that. So, like, you know, getting young people to care about taking care of themselves is also, an important thing

CARTER: It's probably the most radical thing you can do when you're already describing all the work you do to fight the systems of harm.

ROBERTS: Yeah, for sure.

CARTER: I think that's all the questions I have. Thank you so much.

ROBERTS: For sure. Thank you all for, like, letting me talk. That's like—it's weird talking for that long.

CARTER: How do you feel? Like a spinning top right now?

ROBERTS: Weird weird. Well, but it's like, I had to get, I had to get real down with that real quick, when I decided to be a teacher. [01:06:51] So I have, I have a little more practice than I used to, I'll say that. You know, it still feels weird though. It still feels a little weird.

FIELD: Can I ask one last question?

ROBERTS: Of course, yeah, go ahead.

FIELD: I've just been wondering, what's next for you? And what are you looking and hoping, what's in your sightline for the future?

ROBERTS: I am really tired of playing [01:07:21] defense. Like when it comes to housing, I'm just, you know, and that's not to say that I'm like, abandoning the work of homelessness at all, but I'm just, like, tired of trying, you know—like we won, honestly in the grand scheme of things, a very small victory that was not going to in and of itself house people. It was going to make it easier, and I stand by that, that was

true. But I just want to start thinking bigger and like doing more of the work that is getting at the heart of capitalism's entrenchment in housing, and just point out and try to educate people and pull people into work that is getting at that. Because I want there to be more housing that isn't privately owned by rich people. Like, that's it. That's where I'm at right now.

And I don't know what that looks like, but I do think that building more consensus on the idea that whenever I pay money and rent, it should go toward maintaining the building and not maintaining the lifestyle of a wealthy landlord. Like that's, I want more people to kind of understand that that's the way our system works and it doesn't have to. And I also want to do something where we're actually building more housing like that, you know, like let's have community land trusts, so that people don't get displaced by gentrification. Let's have more cooperatives. Let's have more public housing that is decent and dignified and well-funded. I don't know how we do that yet, but I'm thinking about that a lot. And [01:08:51] that's the work that I want to be doing.

I mean I also do like, you know, when I became a teacher I knew that the first task I had was get good at the job, because otherwise no one's going to take you seriously and no one's going to care about how cool you are in the union or whatever. So I was like let me do that first. I'm really, you know, diligently trying to become the best teacher that I can. But I want to get more involved in my union. I want to like, you know, be more a part of the campaigns [01:09:21] that they do and help build my union to be stronger because membership is like the backbone of any union. Like you're not, you're only as powerful as your numbers are. So I want to try to be a person who is actually persuading my colleagues to consider joining the union and, you know, being members and getting involved.

I think that we need more democracy, right? Like that's it. Like our workplaces should not be petty dictatorships, and yet for some reason, as much as we talk about freedom and democracy, [01:09:51] we vote every couple of years and then the rest of our lives are mostly dictatorships. They're mostly lived and experienced as that. So I want to lessen the power of landlords. I want to lessen the power of bosses. I want workers to have more dignity. So, any of that work that I can be a part of, I want to be a part of that work and, you know, just try to make stuff a little better than it is. You know, because we don't always win. Like, sometimes you fight really hard and stuff doesn't go your way. [01:10:21] But sometimes we win and I think that's enough to keep me doing it. You know, doing the work.

FIELD: Thank you.

ROBERTS: Yeah, thank you. Did you have anything, Amy?

KAMP: Oh, I'm good. I feel like you've covered so much, I just really appreciate it, thank you so much.

ROBERTS: Thank y'all. Yeah, no, this was very nice. You know, like I haven't spent an hour talking since the end of the school year, so [laughs]. It's good for me [01:10:51] to have a little practice over the summer, I guess.

KAMP: Welcome back to talking.

CARTER: I'm grateful for it, I feel jealous of those kids.

KAMP: I'm going to turn off the recording.

[Video 1 Ends] [End of Interview]