

Texas After Violence Project
Interview with Micaela Rodriguez

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Interviewer: Murphy Anne Carter

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ABSTRACT

Micaela Rodriguez is a second-year student of social work and activist for dismantling systems of oppression, spurred by her studies and personal experiences. In this interview, Micaela describes how her identity as a Latina, her focus of study in social work, and a call to action inspired by the works of Ava DuVernay, Patrisse Cullors, and Angela Davis, have guided her current work in advocacy and restorative justice.

Micaela discusses how Ava DuVernay's work left a lasting impact on how she understood the criminal justice system and its role in criminalization of Black and Latino communities. Micaela discusses her advocacy work with the Bail Project Hotline in the midst of COVID 19, as well as the general atmosphere of working in advocacy during a public health crisis in which mis- and dis-information ran rampant. Micaela also shares her advocacy work within her community at the University of Houston, noting the interwoven nature of social work practice and advocacy for civil rights and liberation. This interview was conducted virtually by Murphy Anne Carter on June 15th, 2020.

MICAELA RODRIGUEZ [00:00:02] My name is Micaela Rodriguez. I go by Mickey. My pronouns are she/her/hers. I am currently going to start my second year of the MSW Program at the University of Houston - Graduate College of Social Work. That's the Master's of Social Work Program. I did my undergrad at the University of Houston as well in Human Development and Family Studies.

I have been really interested in institutional oppression for a while. I did my senior honors thesis around being a first generation college student and the overlap of marginalized identities – or the intersection of marginalized identities of being a Latina student – being first generation – a nontraditional college student – also talking about being a college student and a parent as well. That project led me to the field of social work where I have been for the past four years. I am really interested in the big issue around mass incarceration. This past year I've had a chance to start learning more about the prison abolition movement – now we see police abolition is also a really big conversation that's going on right now.

How I got into this project is I volunteered with Restoring Justice a couple months ago to help staff the Bail Project Hotline. I was connected with Diana Williams – who is the lead community organizer at Texas Advocates for Justice. This opportunity came across my email from Miss Diana from Texas After Violence Project – the Sheltering Justice Project – I clicked on it to see what it was. I became really interested in – one – the organization and what the mission was – and specifically this project because I feel like I have a lot to contribute around the conversation.

MURPHY ANN CARTER [00:02:18] Absolutely.

RODRIGUEZ [00:02:19] (speaks off camera) She came and told me something that she wants.

CARTER [00:02:45] So polite and very quiet – I couldn't hear anything.

Thank you for that introduction. I'm trying to figure out where to start first because I love hearing about your journey – not only as a nontraditional student and as a mom – but also with this honors thesis and working through these different systems – understanding them on a structural level – which is a valuable foundation.

My first question would be, What was your initial experience with mass incarceration and what has your journey of understanding been? That can be over the past couple of years or the past couple of months with Covid 19 – whatever you can speak to for that.

RODRIGUEZ [00:03:38] That is a really great question and I appreciate you giving me that space because it's definitely been a journey. To be able to articulate it all should be fun.

It started in 2016 during undergrad – that was my first year at U of H. I had my Associate's Degree from Lone Star College and I transferred to U of H. During my first year I was taking a class in Culture and Diversity. That was the first lens of social justice and understanding racism and all forms of oppression.

That year Ava DuVernay released *13th*. I watched that documentary and honestly – within the first opening minutes I was just in tears – I was so emotional because it's something that personally affects me. At the time I didn't realize how much it affected me until hearing the statistics of how many people are locked up – it really hit me hard. That documentary – again – was something that opened my eyes to these systems that operate – and the way that they operate – something that I know now as social construction around criminalization.

That was the first awareness that I had around how media is used to criminalize specifically black people – but also Latinos as well – anybody that they see as a threat. They use that political language and rhetoric to criminalize people and to justify their actions. That was the foundation of my understanding and from that point I was on this personal journey of trying to further understand it.

I believe last year – at the end of May – Ava DuVernay released another docu series – a limited edition series. She covered the story of the – now known as – The Exonerated Five. I thought that was such a brilliant film as well – the way that she broke it down – the series – she focuses on the different aspects of the criminal justice system. One of them is policing and police brutality and she covers the court system and then she covers incarceration or – sorry the third episode is actually post incarceration – it's reentry and parole. And the final episode is incarceration itself.

I've learned so much from those two films. This past year – during my first year of the MSW program – my college hosted this Day of Perspective where they had a panel of artists – local Houston artists who do activism through their art. The keynote speaker for that was Patrisse Cullors – co-founder of Black Lives Matter – an amazing artist – author – activist – everything – she's an

organizer – she's honestly my current hero in this world. I listened to her speech about abolition. I think that was the first – probably not the first time I heard abolition – but the first time it clicked for me that, Okay this is something I need to understand and learn more about.

I started following Patrisse Cullors's work at that time. At the end of my first semester, I was taking a policy class – I did my final policy speech around mass incarceration. Essentially – at that time I was still – I don't know policy. I don't know anything about policy. I don't know the language around policy. My speech was really just about criminalization – of asking my colleagues – future social workers, What is your perspective on your clients? – because many of your clients are criminalized for the issues that you're supposed to be helping them for. What are you going to do – are you going to criminalize them as well – or are you going to see them as human beings who need support?

It felt really good because actually I had a friend at the time who had just recently gotten locked up again. He'd been in and out of jail since as long as I've known him. I was really heartbroken when I heard. I actually wrote a poem that I could probably submit to you at a later time – but I was really heartbroken when I found out that he was back in jail. I had a conversation with him recently about the experience of being in jail. It was the first time that we really connected on that sort of level where he talked about being vulnerable. It's always around, I can take it or however that masculinity complex – how that comes off. This was the first time that he allowed himself to be vulnerable and talk about the trauma that he has experienced – not really in those words – but as a social worker that's what I heard.

I did that policy speech and this past semester in the spring I did – which was like a dream come true – but I had to do – I was taking a class on Confronting Oppression and Injustice – and we did this big final project around any topic we wanted and again I chose mass incarceration. It was a multifocal perspective – like an essay paper – where I covered the historical context – looking at ethnic and class perspectives – feminist perspective – critical perspective – global perspective – all of these perspectives to look at mass incarceration and truly understand what it is – what's the issue – who's affected by it. Also part of that project was a photo/voice presentation. I put together a slideshow of pictures and broke down – from that multifocal perspective – my understanding of mass incarceration.

Now I'm volunteering for Restoring Justice. I was just offered a contract position with Texas Advocates for Justice – so I'll be helping out with their policy stuff. I'm also leading a petition at the

University of Houston for some changes around the relationship to the Houston Police Department and other things we want – to see some changes on campus.

I consider myself an activist. I'm still learning – every day you're learning new things. Hearing from Patrisse Cullors – Angela Davis – the people who are leading this current civil rights movement that we're in. I'm so happy – I'm so proud to be one of the leaders in that movement. Obviously I'm not at the forefront – I'm not one of the big leaders – but I know that in my community there's a lot of people who look up to me. I'm so grateful for that opportunity to – one – finally feel comfortable enough to be able to actually use my voice to speak out – also that so many people around me believe in me – that they are willing to take that jump with me. They're putting in time and effort – helping me organize.

Diana – I didn't even apply for this job – she was like, Hey – she called me up and I was like, Yes – dream come true. Everything that I'm doing right now is a dream come true – it's living my dream of wanting to use my voice to create social change for social justice.

Again – thanks for this opportunity as well because it's definitely – it'll be helpful to me to be able to process all of this. I am seeking counseling as well, obviously, because that is a must – a necessity. But to be able to talk from this perspective on everything that I'm doing – it's going to be really helpful as well.

CARTER [00:13:20] That's amazing – thank you so much. I really appreciate how you are able to articulate some of the academic and more of the professional realm in which you've engaged with some of these ideas. Speaking to how they presented themselves in your personal life as well. I don't know if you could speak more to that – with regard to your community and serving as a leader in your community and if there are specific instances – reaching way back in the past – or just recently – with regard to everything that's happening right now.

RODRIGUEZ [00:14:02] To talk about the overlap between the personal and the professional?
Yes – yes – yes.

CARTER [00:14:08] and your personal experience too – because I love hearing the academic and all these critical perspectives that you're bringing. I'm so curious how they crystallize for you?

RODRIGUEZ [00:14:20] That's a really great point. Something that immediately takes me to this moment – earlier in the spring semester – in my Confronting Oppression class – there was a lecture – we were doing a hybrid class at the time – it was already online lectures. I was listening to one of the lectures and the professor said something that – I can't even explain what the reaction was that I had – but it did not sit well with me. I was like, Yeah – what is she talking about? She said, We have to understand our relationship to the environment without judging the environment. For me, it didn't make sense. I'm a very intuitive type person – I lead with my emotions – the things that I'm doing is because I deeply care. It's a natural thing – to me – to hold these – in social work we have core values – a lot of the social work core values are my own personal values as well. It's a natural process of adhering to these social work values in the work that I do.

But at the time I was like, What does this mean? I don't know how to do that because – something I struggled with in my first semester – in that policy class – I had to write a paper – we had to select an opinion piece – like an op ed written by someone who we strongly disagree with. The whole paper was from this value neutral – don't talk about my opinion –but from a value neutral perspective. I found it incredibly challenging because I was so confused – how is it that we share these values, but this person is saying something that's completely – to me is not making any sense. It was such a confusing process for me. How do I talk about these values, but not put my personal opinion on it? I don't know. I had a hard time and I think I even wrote in the paper, This was challenging to read. The professor was like, I appreciate your honesty.

Anyway when I heard that it felt like – I found it unsettling. The following discussion in class – I brought it up to the professor and we had this big conversation around, What does this mean? I don't remember the particulars of that conversation – but I remember feeling confused – like – I don't know how to do that – I don't think that is right – to tell me to not judge it. How can I not judge it when I'm personally affected by it? I don't know how to separate the two because I lead with my emotions. I'm still trying to figure that out.

I came across some content on social media a few weeks ago that was really disturbing – that painted the University of Houston in this horrible light. It was like a slap in the face to me. I felt really betrayed when I read that. I'm not going to get into the details because I don't want to distract from what we're talking about – but I was like, Wow what is this? That comment came back to me – how can I approach this so I am not judging? What is my relationship to this without judging the environment?

I actually emailed my dean – Allen Detlef – our college dean – I sent him a screenshot and I was like, Please help me make sense of this because I'm thinking back to this, Understand your relationship to the environment without judging the environment. I'm having a hard time making sense of this – help me understand my relationship to this – because I'm feeling really betrayed right now. I asked him, What is – as a student – what is my relationship to this?

He answered very thorough questions. He affirmed my concerns and he also was like, I don't know a whole lot about it – but this is somebody that that might know and I would encourage you to follow up with that person. I never did that – but those are the kind of things – that's the easiest way for me to explain that overlap.

I still struggle with that a lot because when I did the policy speech – it's like, How much of my personal story do I put into this – and how much do I keep around? What I struggle with the most is when we talk about policy and we have to talk about it from this political lens of understanding – like the dynamics of power – and things like that. I feel like there's some part of that that silences my true voice because I have to be careful with how I navigate that.

I can't just say, F you if that's how I feel – because that's not that's not going to get me anywhere – that's not productive. If anything it will get me silenced even further. I have to be careful with how I approach this – who I talk to – how I talk to them – what I disclose. It's exhausting. I talk about this on my social media. It was a popular post – it was during that same kind of conversation when I was like, I think saying the similar sentiment that – I hate how I have to tiptoe around like their rules. I have to comply with what they see as the right way.

There was a white woman that was sitting across the table from me and she was like, Who is they – and rolled her eyes. I didn't react in the moment – but I was like, How can you – if you don't know what I mean when I say, They – I don't know what to say to that. I was kind of dumbfounded.

So there's definitely this – I hate to put it in those terms – but there's this, Us versus they – the people in power who control everything and have the authority to make these decisions and then there's us – the regular people who are supposed to be the ones who are represented in our government yet – where's our voice?

It's definitely a confusing complex to – how do I navigate that to where I want to be my authentic self – yet I have to say it in these acceptable terms and be a respectable person. If I didn't have a

bachelor's degree – and if I wasn't an MSW candidate – nobody would pay attention to me. I had to work for years and years to get to this position – one – to feel comfortable enough to know that what I have to say matters – and two – to have the platform for anybody to even listen to me.

CARTER [00:22:10] I think you're talking about – what I'm hearing too – hearing doubt almost be weaponized against you. As somebody who has been in academia and heard that emotions can't validate judgments – but that's what the legal system is based off of – is emotional sentiments validating judgments – or verdicts of guilty and innocence – which – in my opinion – are both very emotional words.

I think that everything you're describing is so real – and those power dynamics can reinforce themselves even when you're trying to reach them with your authentic voice – and like, Us or them – and the scoff that you describe.

I'm curious what your authentic voice – emotional or not – what has been the message you've been wanting to get across to them – what have you been finding yourself wanting to say?

RODRIGUEZ [00:23:22] At the end of the day it's simply, I'm here and I matter. I think that's really what I was trying to say when I wrote my honors thesis – trying to figure out why – that came up because it took me 16 years to earn a four year bachelor's degree – from the time I graduated high school – I was the first and the only person from my immediate family who graduated high school. That journey was filled with what most people would look at as utter and complete failure for so long.

When I started looking at that journey and analyzing it from this a methodological approach it was embarrassing – like, Oh man I dropped out all these times. My whole take away from that ended up being, What really held me back the whole time was my own belief that I wasn't good enough. I bought into that narrative – like I didn't belong there. Any time that I wasn't listening to that voice – when I felt confident in myself – that's when I was doing well – that's when I've been able to – my 4.0s – all these things.

My takeaway was, I've always been good enough but I let shame hold me back. On a personal level that was – being able to process that 16 year old – the trauma that I went through. It didn't come through that way when I wrote the thesis – which was actually adapted into a chapter that's been published in an edited volume on first generation research.

But someone – Hope Pacheco – I don't want to get very distracted with trying to talk about who she is – but she's an alumni from the GCSW. She works at the University of Houston and was recognized last year by our college as a leader in the field of social work. I came across a blog of hers one day where she talked about edited life stories – and I was like, Wow – yes – that is so true. When I wrote my honors thesis it was a very edited version of what I went through. Even though I was given that chance to fully talk about my experience – I still had to silence part of that because it wasn't appropriate to talk about some of those things I went through.

Anyways, I think I lost my train of thought on what the question was. It's hard – that's what it was – like – what am I trying to say – what would I say – but that's what it is – like I matter even though it's not – I might not come from what you think I should come from. I don't talk the way you think I should talk – or whatever it is that you see that is wrong with me. That's not who I am. I am me and I'm good enough and I matter – I deserve to be heard just as much as anybody else.

CARTER [00:27:12] Absolutely and that's something I feel is – (audio in the background causes a pause in conversation) do you want me to keep going – I can pause for a second.

RODRIGUEZ [00:27:28] (speaks off camera) Can you go to the other room please – because I'm in a meeting still. Can you go to grandma's room or can you turn it down – thank you. Close the door.

CARTER [00:27:47] I think your message of, I'm here and I matter – is something that so many people – particularly who have in any way been touched by mass incarceration – feel and can resonate with. That's something that's so important – thank you.

I'm going to kind of switch gears – I'm curious about your role – as activists – particularly as it's developed in light of the pandemic. I don't know if it has in any way altered your role or how it's informed how you're approaching your activism. I believe the pandemic obviously has changed so many people's lives and I'm curious about you in particular.

RODRIGUEZ [00:28:43] Definitely – more than anything – I always knew that this is an important issue. There's a book I was looking at recently from James Kilgore where he calls it the key civil rights struggle of our time – with mass incarceration. I knew it was at the bottom line of everything.

When I was looking at institutional oppression, I was a first generation college student. I felt mass incarceration is the biggest issue at the root of everything. With the pandemic – what that did was intensify that urgency – like we have to do something right now.

That's why I started with The Bail Project. We know that jails and prisons are – I don't know what the term around it is – but the rapid spread – the poor health conditions – close quarters – it's probably the most dangerous place you can be right now – is in a jail or prison.

People have said a jail sentence is a death sentence right now – any type of sentence is essentially putting people at risk of death. We've seen that – I don't know how many people now have died – but we've seen those numbers are way up there in comparison to the general population.

It started with The Bail Project – trying to help people get out of jail. I've been on that line for a number of weeks and I haven't even gotten one call – like people don't know. They were trying to put a poster inside the jails – I don't know if they ever got approval for that. There's these systemic barriers around trying to get people the help that they need. Not only is it the systemic issues – the way that the system operates – but people are intentionally trying to squash those efforts of nonprofits and the people in the community who are wanting to help in those situations. You can't put a poster in your jail to help these people get out of jail – why?

With the pandemic it's given what someone referred to – one of my mentors talked about this policy window of – when there's something going on right now, this is the time when we can advocate for these policy changes. For me what the pandemic has – I knew this was an issue and this has thrown me into more of trying to understand the policy side. What can be done? Like The Bail Project – that's a great thing – that we want to help people get out of jail and give them the support that they need. But we shouldn't have to do that.

In Houston – at least – I want to say the Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo, she had issued some kind of order where they wanted to pause any arrests – or any new arrests. I don't remember exactly what happened – but I know there's other judges that come out and they're like, She doesn't have the power to do that.

The change – in my thinking with the pandemic – is trying to understand the policy side of it more. It's not like we know what's wrong – but how do we fix it – what can we do to fix it? Greg Abbott – the Texas governor – same thing – he's trying to put a spin on it. I think Dan Patrick tweeted

something like, A crime bomb – that kind of rhetoric that scares people like us who have the power to put pressure on our elected leaders. They use that language to put fear in people – like, We want our streets to be safe and we want our streets to be protected. Those elected leaders understand more than what they let people know – they understand the systemic operations and know how to be systemic in their decisions to keep it that way. It's so frustrating that the people who – we should have the power to be able to put pressure and make our elected leaders do something better – but we can't because they won't even let us have those discussions.

I had gotten a phone call when we first went on shut down – stay home safe orders – I can't remember now – one of my elected representatives – Mike McCall – I want to say. They were in a virtual town hall – like on a phone call. It was like, Stay tuned and you can join. I was like, This is so cool – I've never experienced – maybe I've gotten phone calls in the past – but I always ignored them – like – politics – who cares? They called me and I'm being invited – but when I started listening I was so frustrated. It was right before Texas opened up – right before Greg Abbott made the decision to reopen Texas – probably at the end of April. I was so mad because they were like, We've reached our peak and the numbers are starting to go down. I'm like, What numbers are you looking at – I want to know – what are you talking about? Especially the people who are listening right now – they hear that and that's the only information that they have, Oh our Congress person said the numbers are going down so it's safe – but it's not.

I pulled up CDC and pushed the button to ask a question and then, Well we're out of time. They didn't have time for my question. My question was, Where are you getting these numbers from? As far as I know there's been no peak. I did find in Harris County there was a peak and it had been going down – but at the national level the numbers were still increasing.

I think it would have been worth it to say that in particular, These numbers show that it's been decreasing on this day – but to have this blanket statement that we've reached the peak – unless you're thinking more critically and you're asking questions that could be very misleading. People think it's safe to go outside – it's safe to do this – to resume – and it's not.

There's been a lot of talk now about the second wave – that it's going to be even more – all hospitals here at capacity – over capacity – that was over a month ago – a month and a half. United States has reached over 100,000 deaths – so it's not – like the numbers are not going down – the numbers are still going up every single day. Sorry I keep getting sidetracked

CARTER [00:37:06] No please don't apologize. Everything you're saying is really wonderful to hear and I'm so happy you're sharing all of the experiences because they inform – this moment – right now – no matter how small they may seemingly be. I don't even think they're small.

As you were describing this experience and talking about the numbers – and whoever the rep was – it's like, Did those numbers include Travis County Jail – Harris County Jail. Do those numbers include all of the prisons – does it include Huntsville?

I think there is a tendency – particularly for political reps – to focus on their constituents and forget the people who are – quote unquote criminals – who have been criminalized by the state.

Oftentimes they are also constituents – right? That was something I was thinking a lot about.

You mentioned – passingly – I'd love to hear more about The Bail Project Call Line and saying that you've been working it for a couple of weeks – you haven't heard anything. Could you describe what the call line is for? If you have heard from people – what have you heard – more about that.

RODRIGUEZ [00:38:29] There's this national Bail Project and Restoring Justice is one of the community organizations who is receiving funds from that national organization. They set up a hotline so people in Harris County Jails can call and get bail assistance to help get out of jail. There's a number of qualifications – one is the bond has to be less than \$5,000 – even if people have a bond over \$5,000 we are instructed to still take their information because it's case by case – if there's something we can do we want to – the other thing is you cannot have an ICE hold.

That struck me as, Why not? Why are we leaving those people out? It's because if they get out of jail they won't be released – they'll go into ICE custody – so that makes sense to me. The other thing is it cannot be for a family violence charge. Again – that's something that I was wondering why is that singled out? I still am not 100% sure of the understanding around that. The other thing is you have to be in Harris County Jail and have a friend or family member – somebody that can be a point of reference.

I think I signed up sometime in April and sometime in May is when I was given access to the line and put on the schedule. My schedule is seven days a week from 10 to 12. The hotline is seven days a week from 9 to 6. I haven't gotten any calls during those times – but I know one of my cohort colleagues from the program – she also volunteered and she said she's only gotten one call and it came outside of her scheduled hours.

I know they have a number of volunteers so it rings to someone else before it comes to us. I think it would only come to us if there's an overflow of calls and that person is not available to answer – I think that's only the reason – there's probably not that many people that know about it. I've shared it on my social media but I don't know how many people have reshared it. It's like – word of mouth.

I'm hoping that there are people who do have access to it and have been able to use it. I don't have any of that information. For me personally – I haven't talked to anybody and it makes me sad. We're here but not that many people know about it and if they do know about it I feel like there's probably other barriers keeping them from being able to utilize that resource.

CARTER [00:41:28] Absolutely. Are you in touch with anyone who's currently incarcerated right now?

RODRIGUEZ [00:41:37] Yes – a friend of mine – he's in Kyle. I wrote him a letter and haven't heard anything back from him. I keep in contact with his mom and she told me that he's not allowed to – at the time he wasn't allowed to make any phone calls. She's only able to write letters. The other person is my brother-in-law. He is in the Jordan Unit in Pampa, Texas. He's been there – he's on a 25 year sentence – but he's supposed to be eligible for parole next year around May – March – something like that. I've been in really close contact with him since April. He's been there for – I can't remember how many years – but currently he's been locked up since 2009 – it makes 11 years this year. I'm not sure at what point he got to the Jordan Unit, but the first time we visited him there was in 2013 – he's been there at least for the past seven years.

Back in April – end of March – when I started to become aware of the numbers in prisons and jails – I found out that his unit was actually one of the first ones that went on what they call medical lockdown – I can't remember what the term is – basically any time someone tests positive for Covid 19, they go on lockdown for 14 days.

When I found out in April, they had been on lockdown for about a month. I called his unit and asked, What's going on? At the time there had been six positive cases and my brother in law told me last week that he's one of the only people that has been approved to actually leave his cell because he's on SSI. I don't know what that stands for – but it's like the cleaning duty. He's like, You wouldn't believe it – I keep it immaculately clean in here because I don't want anybody to get

sick. I don't want to be on lockdown. He gets the most time out of his cell because it's his job – he's the only person that has been approved for that position – to clean.

I called and they told me all these things so I wrote him a letter – since then we've been keeping in contact a lot more than – usually I would write him a letter once a year – once every few months because we had so much stuff going on. A lot of times it's hard to sit down and talk about it because it's heavy stuff. I want to let him know what we're going through – at the same time I know that he has it so much worse. If I tell him any kind of bad news I always make sure I put this positive spin on it. Like, We've been through this but this is where we're getting better. I try to always give him some kind of hope. Since April, we've been – weekly letters – he makes cards and stuff for my girls. I think I have something here somewhere – no, they must have took it. He makes cards for my kids and his other niece and nephew.

I was able to finally add my phone number for him to call me – he calls me once a week on Tuesdays when he has free calls. He was telling me last week about the first person who contracted the virus at his unit was – what he called a boss man – that was his words – one of the officers in his unit – his wing.

He's like, They put us on lockdown but the security detail are the people that are coming in and out – they're the ones putting us at risk – yet we have to be on lockdown every time somebody gets sick. They're free to come and go as they please – or as their schedules permits them to – but him and the people he's incarcerated with have to stay in their cells for two weeks at a time. They're not the ones that are responsible for transmitting the disease. How in any world is that fair?

To hear my brother say that he's the one responsible for keeping it clean and how hard he's been working to keep it clean because he doesn't want anybody else to get sick. I tell him about my activism and I try to give him hope. I know that part of that is he is the type that's like, I want to help people if I can. He constantly tells us, I wish there was something I can do and that's why he sends us these art pieces. That's his only way that he can show us any appreciation or do anything for us.

I know he does that because it's like, This is the only thing I can do – if I can't have any effect on the outside world at least within his realm of control – that's what he has control over. He spends every second that he can wiping everything down and cleaning everything because that's all he has control over.

I wish he could just get out now. I wish he could just come home now because he's healthy. He works out, so he's a very healthy person but nobody is immune. Next year I can only pray that he'll still be healthy so he can go to his parole meeting if he gets the chance. He told me a couple weeks ago that they're not even doing parole meetings. There's been advocacy around Greg Abbott issuing some kind of order to let people who are eligible for parole out – but they have reentry – I'm not sure exactly what it's called – some kind of a reentry program that they have to finish before they can get out. Those programs have been suspended because of Covid 19 – so they're stuck – but legally they're eligible to get out. Because of this pandemic that puts them at a higher risk than anybody else in the general population – they're stuck in prison.

CARTER [00:49:57] There is for me – hearing about that he has to be the one to clean – an image – because I know there's a shortage of guards for how many guards are getting sick – in addition to the individuals who are incarcerated. I'm curious if he shared anything with you about what kind of treatment or care is available – if any.

RODRIGUEZ [00:50:35] He didn't really touch on that – but I know from a recent experience he had, it's not good. It's not the quality of care they had. In December he fell from his bunk and he fractured his foot. I didn't have any way of knowing when that happened – but we got a phone call from the spouse of someone that he is incarcerated with that was like, He needs your help – they're not giving him the medical attention he needs. I was like, I don't know what to do – what do I do? I called the unit and was like, I got this message for my brother that he's hurt and he needs medical attention. He's been to the infirmary and has requested x rays – but they gave him Tylenol – and that was it. They might have given him crutches or something. He's been asking for an x-ray because he thinks his foot is broken but he hasn't been able to get the care that he needs. What can they do – what can be done?

They were like, Well call back in the morning at 8:00 so you can ask to speak with the medical facility here. I was like, He's already been waiting 2 or 3 weeks and you want me to wait till tomorrow to call again? I reached out to my partner's uncle – he's formerly incarcerated and he's a pastor now. He has his own church and goes into prisons – and he does services for the prison community. I told him, This is what's going on. Is there something that we can do? He asked me for my brother's SPIN number and what unit and he's like, Let me see what I can do. I never heard back from him after that. I didn't call the next morning because I got a phone call from the same person that said that they gave him a boot.

I don't know if my phone call – or our uncle made a phone call – but between that point when we first reached out and then, he was given a boot. It took all of that for him to get the care that he needed. There's definitely a delay in the services in that regard. I didn't ask him about anybody that's gotten sick and what treatment that they've gotten. I didn't think that far to ask him any of those questions.

CARTER [00:53:32] I'm curious too and wondering if you can – I just had this question and it blew up – I was listening so closely. Can you speak more – because you mentioned it – what's his response to your activism? What has he told you about all that you're doing?

RODRIGUEZ [00:54:01] Yeah – he tells me how proud he is of – one – the accomplishments that I've made in obtaining my education. I got his most recent letter where he was thanking his sister for the time she tried to get him enrolled in school. He's enrolled in a program now. He's got five more classes before he earns his associate's degree and classes he just registered for – he's taking – Sociology is one – and Criminal Justice and he's taking Life Span and Development – which is one of the classes that I've taken as well.

54:48 I know he's – my activism and the things I study – and things I tell him I'm learning about – he's really inspired as well. When I talked to him last week – I mailed him my research paper that I did on mass incarceration. He told me that when he registered for Criminal Justice and Sociology that he referenced my paper. He's like, I want to talk about this – my sister's doing all this stuff. He's really moved and inspired – he wants to learn as well – and he wants to do something too.

It might be arrogant or whatever – people think it's – I'm proud of myself – proud of my growth and of being the type of person who wants to learn and takes the initiative to educate myself and seek these learning opportunities – advocacy opportunities – and seeing the impact it has on the people around me.

I had a discussion a few weeks ago for the very first time – my family has – we haven't lately – but my family had been doing weekly zoom meetings. We had a conversation about mental health and therapy – it was like, Wow. We said in the meeting we could have never had this conversation five years ago – but we're all in this place now where we understand the importance and we're able to have that conversation. I know it's not just for me and that's the whole reason why I do what I do. It's not just about me. It's about my family and it's about my community and the people around me

who are also impacted by this. They don't have the same privilege I do – the access to education – through having that access to education – the access to all the resources that I have.

I do it for myself but also for my community – for the people who are impacted by this. I try to amplify our experiences – we each have our own individual experience – but it's also a collective experience. That's what I try to do is honor that collective experience and bring awareness – and now to bring these policy changes that are needed. I'm still learning about policy but I'm excited about this position with the Texas Advocates for Justice. Like I say, It's like a dream come true to look into criminal justice policy. How can I support their efforts to advocate for the changes that are needed?

So my brother in law – he's very proud – I know he's very proud. I think it gives him some kind of hope to know that – and I tell him, I'm advocating for you and for all of the people that are there with you.

CARTER [00:58:12] Thank you – and I really appreciate the importance that I hear you – again and again – saying for learning and growing – and normalizing that as an experience as we evolve and we really try to change. I really appreciate that as well.

I also want to touch on – we've talked a little bit about activism and about your personal education – the ways in which you have educated yourself and have also tried to educate higher education systems as well – how to handle these issues.

I'm wondering about two things – one is you spoke specifically with Ava DuVernay's, *When They See Us* – which was with the Exonerated Five – and talked about these four parts of the of the system – particularly now what we're seeing the reaction for the George Floyd protests – the rise in consciousness nationally for what you're giving language to.

I'm curious for you what the experience of watching this take center stage in a time like this – during the pandemic – about your experience of watching it knowing that you already have been thinking about these ideas and taking them to heart and making action out of it already for a lifetime.

RODRIGUEZ [01:00:05] I wrote this blog last month in May. I'm also an ambassador for the Graduate College of Social Work at U of H. I wrote a blog where I talked about going to that Day

of Perspective and meeting Patrisse Cullors – and how art has impacted my ability to be my authentic self. Art and artists I have followed over the past year have had a lot of influence over me being able to feel confident enough to finally use my voice – let me not get sidetracked.

I wrote this blog last month where I was talking about finding my true colors – my authentic voice and using art as a form of activism. So art and activism – artivism – there's this term – artivism and using artivism to shape the political climate. That's one of the reasons Patrice Cullors is such a huge idol to me because she uses performance art and I think that is so powerful – to use art as a way to send this message – that political language that is so dry it takes out that personal aspect of the story – like the storytelling – art brings that in – it tells a story.

Yeah – watching all of this stuff happen. In that blog, I said something like, I'm grateful for this light that burns in me – it's kept alive by my idols like Patrice Cullors – Angela Davis – seeing them doing the work that they do. It gives me hope. I finally understand this concept of all lives will not matter until black lives matter.

I know that by supporting them and by supporting the Black Lives Matter movement it's also a form of self-preservation for me because my experience is, I matter. At the end of the day, the experiences that I have stemmed from the systemic racism and racial oppression of black life – I think that's why Black Lives Matter has become so important to me because black liberation is liberation for all of us. It gives me so much hope to see how powerful Patrice Cullors – her passion and her care for everything – for everyone. That's what gives me hope and fuels my fire.

She was one of the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement – now she's revamped it to this movement for black lives. When she first launched I signed up – long time ago – I signed up to get text message updates from her. This past Sunday I got this text message update from her with a profile picture. So we're launching this new movement for Black Lives Movement and the first day of action is to change your profile picture in defense of black lives – something like that. Immediately I was like, Yes, I'm in – I'm all in for this and I changed my profile picture.

The petition didn't start as part of that but what I'm doing is very in line with this movement. What I'm doing is part of this movement. We're using the hashtag #revolution for our petition and all of our organizing efforts around that – I consider it part of the movement for black lives. Right before we launched the petition I had people organizing – it started as an op ed – my personal opinion – and turned into the petition. I had other people working with me to develop the ideas around the

demands and right before I published it – you can choose a cover photo for the petition – the person who's closest to me – who organized – their spouse is an artist. I was like, Does your wife have something that they can contribute? She sent me a picture and I was like, Oh my God it's so perfect.

I wanted to cry because it's the perfect image and it was a contribution from a local artist that we used. It's inspiring to watch what they're doing and to be able to take that and do something – to follow their lead and bring that to my community. I told Patrice Cullors in those text messages, I love and respect the work that you're doing in LA – but how can I bring that to my community? She – at first – had suggested an organization to follow. I started following that organization – I started learning about who were the other organizations locally. It makes me feel good knowing that I'm on the right side of all of this – following the leaders of this movement – following their lead.

I'm trying to help bring my community into that movement. In that research paper about mass incarceration I put in there, All social workers should be concerned with this. All social workers should support the prison abolition movement. I'm trying to bring this perspective to social work. I know it's there – but specifically in the conversations within my circles.

It's amazing to see now. We have a group text message and every single day we're having conversations – people are sharing – like, I'm reading this and I'm learning about this. We're talking about these things in this circle that we have and it makes me feel good to know that I'm part of that movement – at least I hope I'm part of the change that we desperately need and want to see right now. It is hard work – exhausting – but it is so worth it if we can get to a point where some of these changes are actually made and we can start to see change for the better.

It comes down to the vision of allowing yourself to be vulnerable – to dream about what you want. It's a dream we've been working toward. I say we – but – civil rights movement – Ida B. Wells – Angela Davis and Martin Luther King – activists for centuries and for years and years who have been doing this work. It's all about that dream of black liberation.

I think at the very American foundation – black liberation is American liberation because the country was founded on slavery. Our entire American economic system is off of the backs of black lives. I think it's just time that we – as a country – really reckon with that – also at the very individual level as well – looking at how we each contribute to that.

That's something I've been trying to do since I was in that Culture Diversity class. My professor was a black woman – amazing leader – amazing educator. It wasn't the content of the class – it was the way she taught it that allowed me to see who am I beneath all of these labels I've been given by our culture – by our society – and trying to understand my role. How have I contributed to this and how can I contribute to dismantling these systems of oppression?

I'm proud of myself and I'm happy that my focus is where it is. I see the way that week of action from the Movement for Black Lives – we were on point – everything we were doing was on point with that movement – and it wasn't planned in that way. That's how much of an influence Patrisse Cullors has had on me – like, I'm already moving in this space she has created for me – to allow me to move through – and to do that work. I'm really in tune with her work and what she does. I am so grateful for her and for Angela Davis and those thought leaders on this that educate me and give me the chance to further educate myself. and bring that awareness and education – those advocacy efforts – to my community and be part of all of that. It's a great feeling – especially the affirmations from the people who are now involved – they're like, Thank you for giving us this opportunity – it's a great feeling, especially amidst all of this stuff that's going on right now.

I said this somewhere along the line, What I'm feeling is so deep it can only be expressed through actions. My actions are me trying to deal with what's going on – something has to be done – we have to do something – it has to be right now. If you're not paying attention and you're not contributing to this movement in some way – you're in the way.

CARTER [01:11:59] There's been a couple of different places where you've said this – and it's helped me in my thinking – you first mentioned it when you were describing how dry policy language is – and then in response to that – talking about ways in which art animates that language – and how much – in your community – you're finding ways to give language – something interesting is that you're pointing to is policy language is really dry – it masks the fact in its dry language – that it's – it's reality. It's shifting people's lives and it's real, and visceral, and intuitive and emotional – all of these things that you've been saying throughout this talk.

This is something I'm thinking about and appreciate you sharing. Along those lines – what – in your language – and you don't have to get into this if you would prefer not to – what language and what demands are you finding yourself asking in your activism? I know you're talking about – with U of H in particular – what are the demands and the expectations you're trying to set forth – to have this language make way for the world – for this vision – for this change?

RODRIGUEZ [01:13:27] With this petition our main focus is around the idea of defunding police. One of the things – the drivers behind this was that in Minnesota where George Floyd was murdered – the president of the University of Minnesota – two days after his death – Joan Gable made this announcement that the university was going to cut ties with the Minneapolis Police Department. I thought that that was extremely powerful.

Here – in the University of Houston community – U of H is situated in Third Ward – which is where George Floyd is from – where he grew up. I think the whole idea came from – we had not heard anything from the U of H president – Renu Khator. She had not made any type of public statement – had not sent any kind of statement to the university at all. The University of Houston – the only thing they had said about George Floyd was – I saw a tweet that was something like, George Floyd was from the Third Ward community – we're mourning with you guys – we send our thoughts and prayers. I was upset by the lack of any type of care around the issue – that they were like, We have to say something only because he was from Third Ward. If he hadn't been from Third Ward, they probably wouldn't have commented on it.

Originally my op ed was, The University of Houston owes George Floyd more than 39 words – that's a whole other story – the op ed and how it turned into a petition. I had submitted that piece to the Daily Cougar – the University of Houston newspaper. Before – it was never published – but the same day that I submitted it – the president – President Khator did release a statement – it was, What can we do – what must be done?

When I released the petition it said, Thank you for asking. This is what we think can be done. First is that we want the University of Houston to follow the example of Joan Gable and cut ties with HPD because – here in Houston– Black Lives Matter Houston ,and Texas Advocates for Justice, and a number of other organizations have been calling for transparency for weeks from Houston Police Department. Since April 21st there have been six shooting deaths – HPD Officer-Involved shooting deaths. They shot and killed six civilians since April 21st. This was already happening – this was already going on when George Floyd was murdered – here in our own community – where we were looking for accountability from the Houston Police Department. It's tragic.

Since George Floyd there have been a number of other deaths. A man was hung in Palmdale – hung from a tree. There have been back to back murders of black trans women – it's still happening – George Floyd was not the last person – but he's the one that – exploded into this huge movement –

now everybody's talking about it – even people who have never considered abolish police or abolish prisons are talking about defunding. I think that is amazing.

That's our first demand – we want transparency. What is the University of Houston's relationship to the Houston Police Department? That's one of the things we're going to be focusing on. We want the University of Houston to defund HPD by canceling whatever current contracts or future contracts they have. The first thing we want to know is, What is the University of Houston's relationship to the Houston Police Department?

We haven't been able to find any type of public information on that – we deserve to know what that relationship is and whatever that is – we don't want that relationship – we don't want to support them in any way.

This is not just about George Floyd – not just about police brutality – it's about the entire criminal justice system and the way that it operates – the way power is abused. That's the main central thing. Also – the other thing is around anti-racist curriculum – because the University of Houston is a tier one university – the highest level of research university that you can reach. In the College of Education they have this education and research center. They have access to statewide – huge data sets – large data sets – for statewide information. They can use all of those resources to – and this is – we don't know – there might already be some initiatives happening – already in place for this – but we want them to use that resource to look at racism in schools across Texas and to make sure that there is anti-racist teacher training – anti-racist curriculum.

Anybody could just be like, What does a university have to do with it? They have a lot of power and things that they can do – signaling to support these local advocacy groups who are calling for transparency. They could have a lot of influence if they were to support those efforts. University of Houston – there's 40,000 students enrolled – how many faculty are there – the board of Regents – all of these people the University of Houston has influence over? If President Khator makes that decision to cut ties – that is a huge influence.

The other thing is in city council – they just, Oh my God I'm sorry. This is really frustrating – but they literally just approved a budget to increase funding for HPD by like \$1 billion – when the majority of public comment was to advocate for defunding and to not pass that. They passed the budget and deferred it to a committee – now a committee is going to be looking further into it – it's

like, You're not listening to the people if you're still making these decisions that goes against what all of us have shared that we want.

It's not just about taking money from police – but it's about using that money to invest in the community services that we need and deserve – mental health – drug use – these issues that are health issues – where people are criminalized and then locked up for it – it doesn't make any sense.

There's a report that Diana Williams published – Texas Advocates for Justice – it talks about the Harris County jails being referred to as the largest mental health facility in the country. That is so disturbing – any mental health professional should be extremely disturbed by that – and if that's not a reason for you to involve yourself in advocacy around defunding police – then I honestly would question your commitment to that profession or your ability to serve your clients in a way that is just and equitable. If you're not willing to acknowledge that and be critical about that concept that – why are people being treated for mental health in jails? It should not be in that context where your rights are taken away – where you have no say in your own self-determination – especially social workers – social work, mental health professionals – this literally should be your number one priority.

We have a lot of support from our Dean – Alan Dettlaff. When I first wrote the op ed and submitted it – I emailed it to him at 5:00 in the morning and was like, Take a look at this. Even before the op ed when I reached out to him like, This is extremely disturbing – he's been so supportive of – one – understanding my experience and my perspective. He's extremely intentional in putting himself in my shoes and seeing where I'm coming from. As someone in a leadership position – someone that has power and authority – he has willingly shared that with me by giving me advice on what to do. He was the one that threw out the idea, Maybe you could turn this into a petition. He's been extremely supportive with – one – making sure that I have an outlet to express my concerns and then – making sure that I'm heard.

When I was organizing the petition – the reason I was able to get so many people on board is because I asked our dean, Do you think you could ask people if they're interested in helping? He sent out an email to the entire GCSW student body like, There's another opportunity for organizing – contact Mickey if you're interested. I had people coming – this living document where it was my op ed – but also little disclaimer was – this was submitted to The Daily Cougar and it's now being transitioned to a petition. It was, Take a look and see where we can use your input.

I had people reaching out to me all day on Monday – June 1st I want to say. I would send them the link to the document and be like, This is where we're at. So – people would either come – they would read and say, This is not something that I'm interested in – just leave – or if it was like, Let me look – people would contribute. Now we have a core group of people who did contribute to the thought on the petition. We're moving into this next phase of – how do we actually get these demands – how do we get these changes?

We're looking at what's already being done at U of H and what are some suggested policy solutions around this. We've asked for – number one – the transparency around the relationship with the HPD – and severing that relationship – whatever it is. The rest of our demands is around anti-racist curriculum. Like the provost – we want to make sure that they include black authors – that they bring black authors to our campus. We suggested the University of Houston purchase a copy of *How To Be Anti-Racist* for every student and every faculty – staff – and a number of things that go along with that. Making sure that on our campus that our students are educated around anti-racism efforts and also making sure that we extend that advocacy to the Houston community by supporting nonprofits like Texas Organizing Project – Texas Advocates for Justice – Black Lives Matter Houston – all of these organizations that are already on the ground and doing that work. Why is University of Houston not supporting that? Especially that you are an institution of education and at that – a tier one university – get with the times and support the efforts that are already on the ground.

It being a political issue is what makes it so difficult because they have this like, We can't take sides – but at the end of the day, it's more than just a political issue. This is the reality – this is the lived experience of students – not only on your campus – but of people in the community that your university is responsible for gentrifying – and pushing people out of their homes. University of Houston should be held accountable for all of those things for their students – educating their students on what this issue is – and why it has blown up to what it is right now – educating your students on the abolition movement and what it really means to defund police and also accountable to the community – the people – the residents who you're impacting their lived experience by raising the property the value – raising taxes – raising cost of living in this community that they can't afford – they have to go find somewhere else to live.

It comes down to what the University of Houston owes – not just George Floyd – but their students – the entire community – the Third Ward community – and the city of Houston – Texas – and the country. It starts on our campus – and because our campus is situated in Third Ward – it's so

important. It's important for the university – as an institution – to step up. It's important for President Khator to – as an individual in a leadership role – step up and – for me personally – I'm really glad that I know I'm on the right side of this. I don't see why Renu Khator would not want herself to be on the right side of it – and the university that she leads.

I'm hoping that I get the chance to ask her that question. I hope all of these efforts that we're putting in – that we're successful in. I can say that we have been successful in that we – at least – have opened the conversation. I do have a meeting scheduled with the VP of U of H Systems tomorrow – and a number of other administrative people from U of H – at least there is going to be space for me to speak up – but I don't know what they'll do with that. I can expect some resistance – that they're going to have all the reasons for why – and this was already alluded to in a statement from Khator – I forgot how she said it – like, We definitely want change – but we need more than unrealistic – I don't forget how she said something about unrealistic calls for sweeping gestures that don't address the problem.

We took it as – that was a reference to our petition – saying that the things we've called for are sweeping gestures that are not going to handle the root cause of the problem. I'm hoping that – at least – we can have that discussion of, If you don't think what we're saying is right – then tell me what you are going to do – because doing nothing is not acceptable. Saying that you're going to do something is not acceptable – we want to see real changes. We're going to keep pushing forward with trying to hold the university – at the institutional level – accountable and also Renu Khator – at the individual level – holding her accountable for the decisions that she's making. You're muted.

CARTER [01:31:15] I do that because I get worried some background noise is going to come in. It's interesting to me because this conversation is touching back to where we first started – it's proving the myth of neutrality – there's no such thing as being neutral. If you refuse to do something – that too is something.

Whether it's been conscious or not – we've woven this understanding – in whatever institution it may manifest – it varies – but neutrality isn't real – it's imagined in this way. That's interesting – personally – as someone who's listening – and in such a fortunate position to listen – thank you.

I have another question that may feel like a T-ball question because it's not a moving target – but how you see – or if you see – this particular part of our conversation about those demands – about how it connects to mass incarceration – and if it does.

RODRIGUEZ [01:32:30] I think that's definitely a relationship – it's been hard to identify. It adds this whole – petition and the efforts to create change on campus – it came from understanding the importance of the abolition movement – prison abolition and police abolition. One of the things that has come up in these conversations is that – particularly on our campus – what students have highlighted in the discussions happening now – even the University of Houston Campus Police, they have a role in over policing.

We've heard there's another petition going on from a student organization on campus. It's around – specifically defunding – I'm not sure about defunding – but calling for accountability for the University Campus Police – because they have overpoliced black led student organization events – there's more police presence – more aggressive force.

It's a relationship that is hard to identify – part of it is wanting to educate the community – University of Houston community – on the work that has already been done by Angela Davis, Patrice Cullors, and many others. Why are we not taught those things in our classrooms? I can see the argument of – it's a political issue and we don't – I know professors that are very careful about their language because they're like – we can't give any impression of support either way.

It has to do with mass incarceration if you think about it – in that photo voice presentation I mentioned – one of the pictures I have is of Harris County Jail. You can see right across the bayou is the University of Houston – downtown. It's such an interesting juxtaposition when you look at the two buildings – and you think about what goes on inside those walls. In education, we have teachers – it's around this idea of – especially in college – about critical thinking, and setting goals, career goals – things like that. The purpose of education is so you can get a good job and make a good living. In jail, it's the complete opposite – all of your freedoms and rights are stripped away. You may have access to education – but even if you do, it's so restricted.

Education is such an important institution because that's how we raise our citizens of our country – this is how we educate them – where we tell them what their purpose is in society – is through education. We should be targeting educating people on the real history of the United States. There's this – for lack of better words – whitewashed version – but it comes down to colonial perspective.

So there's this decolonize education efforts – that's what we – for me personally – I can't speak for the other leaders or anybody else involved – but for me personally, that's what it comes down to is

decolonizing education and being honest and truthful with the real history of how things were – not spinning it so it's –

One of the people collaborating with me shared with me recently – and I've seen this on social media plenty of times – it's in her own home that she's like, I can't believe this is actually happening – but her sixth grader was given an assignment for, What are the positive and negative effects of slavery? My friend was like, They're all negative – there's no positive. What it comes down to – let's be honest about the way that we're educating our kids – in K through 12 – pre-K – also on college campus – starting with our campus.

I'm sure we're not the first ones – but we should be one of the most diverse campuses in the country. The University of Houston loves to promote how diverse they are – but if you're a student – if your diverse student body is telling you, We don't feel heard – we don't have a voice and the way you're educating your students is not representative of our experience – there's a serious issue that needs to be addressed.

It definitely is connected to mass incarceration – because one of the reasons that mass incarceration is as bad as it is – is because of the systemic ways that the United States government has taken away the right to education. Jim Crow laws made it illegal for black people to pursue an education – took away voting rights. All of this has contributed to reasons people are trapped in that cycle of incarceration.

In my research – one of the things that was pointed out is – incarceration does not decrease crime. What is correlated to decreasing crime is better access to education – better job opportunities – better wages – housing – meeting people's basic needs is what helps keep them out of jail. College of Education – College of Nursing – Liberal Arts – all these different areas – disciplines of study – we should be focusing on anti-racist efforts and deconstructing the systems of oppression. All of those things contribute to mass incarceration – like our health – I don't know how I'm trying to say this – but there's the social determinants of health. Our experience in education – in our school – those inner circles – micro systems – all of that contributes to a person's likelihood of being incarcerated. Even being a victim of some kind of crime – it's all interconnected.

It's not an easy relationship to draw – but it is there. In academia – in a tier one university – you should use these resources – the knowledge – and all of the tools you have – it should be used in strategic and methodological ways to deconstruct the systems of oppression that we all live in. It

starts with Black Lives Matter – but it's not just about black people or black lives – it's about all of us as Americans – as anybody that lives in this country – whether legally an American or not. It's all of our personal lived experiences.

Storytelling and talking about lived experiences is so important – but it gets lost when you're doing statistics and data – and policy – they don't talk – there's no space to talk about those lived experiences. The stories are in the data – and the stories are in the policy. I think we have to highlight that – we have to be intentional in listening to the live stories and responding in caring and sensitive ways that improve people's lived experiences so we are intentional and using the power that we have to improve those experiences. That's what the University of Houston says they're supposed to do. That's what – my college – our mission is political – economic – social – racial justice. If we're saying these things we need to prove it with our actions.

That's really what we're asking the University of Houston to do. We want you to prove what you claim you're doing. You claim you support Third Ward – and that you are mourning with us – if that is really true – show us with your actions and prove that you want the same change we do – and that you believe us when we say we are hurting – this is the change that we need in order for us to heal.

CARTER [01:43:01] Absolutely – thank you for that. I agree with you – it is something where – depending on where you stand – it can be difficult to draw. I have one more question and I also – one more personal question – but I also want to open it up to you – if there's anything else that you would like to add before I ask my last question?

RODRIGUEZ [01:43:38] Yeah – I don't want to get too into detail – but this past week I've had some encounters with law enforcement that drives every point that I'm trying to make – police are not trained to respond with care – they're trained to respond with force. Anybody that has had any type of interaction with law enforcement can tell you that – but it depends on who you're talking to.

People – on an individual level – need to think critically about their own relationship with police and the whole criminal justice system. That's really it.

We have to challenge ourselves to think about how we contribute to perpetuating the systems of oppression and what can we do to be intentional about contributing to dismantling that? If you are

somebody who – your life has not been personally impacted by mass incarceration or the criminal justice system – then the question you have to start asking yourself is, Why – why that is.

Literally every single person – in some way – shape or form – has some type of relationship to the criminal justice system and mass incarceration. If more people were to be aware of that and be intentional about it we could see some real changes – hopefully in our lifetime – and not 100 years from now people will be still talking about this issue – where people can finally start to live.

CARTER [01:45:37] I think it's something that – as time progresses – we'll understand better and better. But I do think it's no coincidence that so much of this action and movement has happened in the midst of a pandemic.

RODRIGUEZ [01:45:55] For sure – it gives clarity of what's really going on because there's not time to try to twist that narrative around – everything is so fast happening. The exposure alone to the pandemic rates in prisons and around the country – around the world. I think people are forced into that – you have to stop and ask yourself, What can I do? If you just sit around – there are people who don't have the bandwidth or capacity – but those are the type of people who probably have already been asking themselves for years and need a break – need some rest – it's time for the people who have been idle to start getting involved.

CARTER [01:47:05] Absolutely. My last question – which I've been asking everybody is, What is bringing joy during this time?

RODRIGUEZ [01:47:17] If I had to sum it up in one word I would say community. Without community, there's no movement – no advocacy for change. One person alone is important – but when we all work together towards a shared vision, it's so much more powerful. It comes down to the people who are advocating alongside me – also to my family – the people who are supporting me through what I've been going through this past week – my kids – my GCSW community – my folks at the Graduate College of Social Work – on both sides of this social work advocacy – but also in the personal things that I'm going through.

One of my friends – God I love her – she put together a YouTube video. She told our cohort, Mickey's been going through a hard time. I'm going to put together a slideshow of words of encouragement. Probably half of my cohort contributed and said some really nice – supportive things about me – they made a YouTube video with really sentimental music and everything.

So – community – it's having a safe place to be myself and know that I'm loved and accepted – it feels really good. It's not just that I – personally know that I'm on the right side – but the affirmations from the people who care about me feels so good – it's much needed – it keeps me going – gives me the energy that I need. That people believe in me – that I'm doing the right thing and I have to keep going. In my efforts I'm also bringing these people with me who want somewhere to be – they want some way to contribute – I've been able to give that. Community and all in all areas and all spaces.

Now that I've been given a position with Texas Advocates for Justice, I'll be more involved in that organizing community as well – connecting with other folks who have this vision as well. It comes down to – the vision is for healing – we've experienced pain for too long and we want a collective healing. That has brought me joy – being able to connect with other people who also have that same shared vision and are willing to contribute whatever it takes to get there.

CARTER [01:50:20] Awesome – thank you so much. Is there anything else before I hit the stop button for recording?

RODRIGUEZ [01:50:28] No – I don't think so – just, Thank you.