Dan-Ramiah Bingler

New Orleans, LA

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Interviewer: Carly Berlin

Transcription: Sharp Copy Transcription

Length: 1 hour, 28 minutes

Project: Mutual aid and food in New Orleans during the pandemic and after Hurricane Ida

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Carly Berlin: So, just to set up where we are, my name is Carly Berlin. The date today is May 6th, 2022. We are at the Unitarian Universalist Church at the corner of Jefferson and Claiborne in New Orleans, and I am going to be interviewing Dan Bingler. Just to start off, would you mind introducing yourself for the recorder, tell us who you are and what you do?

Dan Bingler: Sure. My name is Dan Bingler. I'm the founder and operations coordinator of the Greater New Orleans Caring Collective, and I run a mutual aid organization.

Carly Berlin: Awesome. Would you mind sharing your birth date, for the record?

Dan Bingler: I was born January 20th, 1984.

Carly Berlin: Where were you born, and how did you get to New Orleans?

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And, also, I'm going to scoot a little bit closer so I don't have to reach so far to get this to you. Yeah, all right. There we go.

Dan Bingler: I was born in Plaquemines Parish. I was born in the place of Bayou Mardi Gras in a little hippie commune on the other side of the river from Buras, Boothville, and Fort Jackson. My dad lived in New Orleans my entire life— has lived in New Orleans my entire life. But when I was almost six, we left the commune and went to Florida, where I was raised. But came back to New Orleans in 2015, and haven't left since.

Carly Berlin: Got you. Take me back to your hometown a little bit more. Can you describe it for me?

Dan Bingler: Yeah, well, it was a pretty unique circumstance. I grew up in Gainesville, Florida, although, as I said, my dad's been here my whole life, so I've spent summers and winters here.

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But the place of my origin, Fort St. Philip, or we called it Vela-Ashby Experimental Farms , it was just a weird, little hippie commune of like twelve adults and six kids. I spent my early days on the Mississippi River and exploring around the Civil War fort, a really interesting formative part of my life that, as an adult, I look back on and, as I learn more about Louisiana history and my own personal history, it just is even more impactful to where I've come in my life.

Carly Berlin: Awesome. Because this interview is for this project about mutual aid and food, and for this larger organization, focus on food in the South, can you talk a little bit about your relationship to food, growing up?

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Dan Bingler: Yeah. I was a very picky eater when I was young. [laughter]

Carly Berlin: [laughter]

Dan Bingler: That's what I'm told a lot. Food has always been a big part of culture, especially being familiar with New Orleans, it's so connective. It's so much a part of being neighborly, feeding each other. It's something I probably took for granted when I was younger. But I've

worked in the service industry for many years. I've been working with food, and building relationships, and it's all really connected, especially once you really, again, start to understand the New Orleans culture and how music and food and conversation and community are so intertwined and so interconnected. Food really does become the pathway to the conversation.

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Looking at when people are struggling, it is also the pathway to the conversation because, while you need to know what else they're going through, it doesn't matter what else they're going through if they're hungry.

Carly Berlin: I want to take us back to March 2020, and also just say for the record that I know you because I was involved in this mutual aid food distribution really kind of ad hoc thing in those very early days of the pandemic. I was distributing meals to kids who I had worked with in an after-school program, and my supervisor got linked up with you because we had extra meals at some point, and I don't totally know exactly how that happened. But, I guess, take me back to how you ended up in that position at that moment.

Dan Bingler: It is wild to look back, and it's funny too, just knowing each other and having had that experience where y'all just had extra milks and apples sometimes, and I'm like, "I'll take whatever because everyone needs food."

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And as time goes on, it's just funny too— the anecdote of, y'all are providing us food, and then we eventually get connected to so much food, and y'all run out of food, and I'm like, "Oh, well,

just come and get food from us for your people then." It's very mutual aid. It's a very mutual aid story. But, wow, March 2020. I think right around Mardi Gras, like the beginning of March, I really think everyone was taking for granted just what we were about to be dealing with. But I was listening to a lot of people around me, who I respected, being very concerned about it, and so it helped me really put in perspective, like, we are going to be dealing with something very serious. And I was sitting around in the service industry, working fine dining, having pre-shift meetings where the managers are like, "Oh, it's just going to pass quickly."

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"The summer's going to be the new spring. All the business will shift to the summer." Everyone's saying like, "I don't know. People are freaking for no reason." And I remember steadily being a voice of caution for that, and saying, "Hey, y'all, billionaires don't cancel sports games. They don't understand how to lose that much profit. It's not a conception they have. Banks don't pause mortgages, unless they all stand to lose so much more, even just through liability. People don't just do those things unless something's very serious." It kept going on for that couple weeks of March. Then March 15th, bars closed down at midnight. That was the Sunday, March 15th.

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I went home that night and started thinking about what are we going to do directly? Then Monday, when I go in to lunch, and we're sitting there for pre-shift, and I'm basically saying, "Why are we open? Shut us down, and sell us disinfectant at cost. Like, you're a big restaurant, and we, the people who work here, need to be safe." The chef [laughter] was the only one who

took me seriously, and I found out later it was because his wife was like 11 days in the hospital from COVID at March 16th. He was like, "Look, I'm sorry, we can't give you disinfectant at cost because I don't know when I'm going to be able to get more. But here's my Restaurant Depot card. It's yours." An hour later, I'd been cut because there was no business [laughter], and that night, started GNO Caring Collective based upon the advice of someone I'd been connected to who was a disaster-relief coordinator in developing nations, who— I didn't know them.

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But she was like, "Hey, you're asking some good questions on these groups that other people aren't asking. If you really want to help people, here's how we do it." She's like, "I'm eight months' pregnant and homebound. I just don't have energy for it. [laughter] But it'd be great if someone did." [laughter] Not the first time I've taken good advice from a woman, certainly not the last, and certainly as important to GNOCC as anything else is that kind of leadership. March turned quickly into April, and we almost immediately were legitimized. Week 1, we were just trying to like connect to people, but we did. We got a phone line set up. People could call and leave a voicemail or text us, and tell us what their needs were.

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We were able to just identify the need so rapidly that way, and that gave us the power to reach out to volunteers to say, "Hey, folks, these things are needed. These supplies are needed. These people need this." Maybe naively, when we started, we were like, yeah, we want to do three specific things. Not naively, but we wanted to do three practical— what could you actually do? One is, we want to make people's groceries for them and, naively, we thought that meant picking

them up for them. And we wanted to get the school meals to people's homes so families didn't have to go cram in a car and go to a location to get these meals. And we wanted to set up a laundry service for people without a washer and dryer. Because how can we help people stay safely self-quarantined, was the real question. If we want people to stay at home, how do we facilitate that as neighbors in the community because that's a pretty classist thing to ask people to do without a support network around them.

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And, like I said, naively, we thought that this would be something where we were assisting people to get their own groceries. But the reality was the people who were reaching out to us were people who were hungry already, and didn't have access to resources already. It quickly went from, "What are your needs?" when we first talked to them, to, "How many days of food do you have?" We weren't prepared for that emotionally or mentally, necessarily, even though I knew that that need existed. We were trying to do a COVID response, and what you find is everyone who already needed this already needed it, and now just more people do as well. But those people are the ones who are— they're still reaching out. They've been reaching out, so they're going to connect to your COVID relief. "Well, I'm starving." They may not even believe in COVID but they're hungry, and you have to respect that. I went on a tangent a little bit.

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But that early time of relief work directly correlating to food, it was crazy because we got access to so much food through these structural resources. And they had all this food but they had no idea where to send it. They didn't know where the need was. They knew that there was need, and

they knew they had a lot of resources, but they had no path [laughter] from the resources to the need. And that was something that was very surprising to see that there was such a role for us to immediately fill. It was very disappointing, honestly. It really lowered my respect for our support system itself, because how do you have all this food, all these resources, just sitting, and you have no idea where it's going?

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You have no idea who's going to organize it to those people? You have no idea how those people are going to be found? Within like, I want to say like, within ten days of the pandemic, still in March, I was kind of privileged into a phone call. As a white man, male-bodied person, I think I definitely got a lot of looks of legitimacy where I didn't necessarily deserve them. Even whether or not the work was being done, like, people just looked at me like, "Oh, okay, this must be official." Where it's like [laughter], literally, I just got furloughed as a fine dining server. Like, what the hell am I doing here? [laughter] But we get in on a phone call, and Second Harvest food network is saying how they got this grant for non-perishable groceries, lots of them, and they need certain things, and they're willing to pay a bunch of people for them too. They're looking at working with Lyft or Uber to like do deliveries and stuff, and all this.

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And they're like, "We need to identify elderly, homebound, and immunocompromised families that this program will qualify for. We need to identify people who can deliver these to them, and we need to identify who can coordinate all that." I'm on this Zoom call. I'm on a phone, so I don't even have a video or anything. I'm in here like raising my hand in my room like, "Oh, we

do all three of those things already. [laughter] Like, I have two hundred families identified, and we're delivering groceries to them already with volunteers, and connecting with them about their emotional needs and other needs as well, not just the food but like continuous community care and support." And they were like, "Oh, okay." And I don't think they knew [laughter] how quickly we were going to be able to leverage that.

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But they were like, "Yeah, here's a list, register families, and we can start doing this." So, the first week, we did 91 families, and the second week, we did two hundred families. Third week, we did about four hundred families. Fifth week, we did like six hundred families. And from like the seventh week on, we did eight hundred families, eight hundred and fifty families, every single week. We also connected an undocumented organization to the same resource, and they ended up getting about five hundred families a week for them as well. It started off with like some of our families, we were just like, "Yeah, just take these." But, eventually, it splintered off, and they were able to do their own thing. That's a staggering amount of food to me, and it was really incredibly ridiculous that they were like, "Here, take this." I'd be going to this giant commercial loading dock where like eighteen-wheelers are coming.

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And I would line up cars, and have them come by. "Here's your ten boxes, and here's where they're going. Here's your ten boxes," fifty cars. [laughter] It was really wild. It was really wild to go from a place where I'm sitting in my room, March 16th, like what could I do practically

speaking? What could we actually do? Let's not say we care. Let's do things, and then say we cared. It was just ridiculous. [laughter]

Carly Berlin: I have so many questions. But I think the first one is, you were saying, "We were doing X, Y, Z thing." Who was "we" in that moment? Who were you working with and kind of mobilizing this with?

Dan Bingler: I guess it started just me. Within a day, there were like 20 other people invested emotionally in it.

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By day three, when I had social workers and guidance counselors calling my hotline, and asking if it was real, and I'm like, "We're real people. I don't know exactly what I can do for your client but I'd like to be connected to them so we can at least have an idea of what their needs are." I'm sorry, I just lost my train of thought. We quickly became a group of four of us: Julie, Allie, Naomi, and myself. And we just tried to wrangle together something that could become sustainable to the scale that it was quickly growing to. And Allie started setting up the website. Naomi started looking for fiscal sponsorship, and organizing a database for us. Julie started running the phones, and kicked me off the phones to go find us resources. And that's how the initial kind of split.

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And we had lots of volunteers, but those were the people— like, we were kind of the steering committee, if you will. It was very much an autonomous, non-hierarchical collective, so people

kind of could plug in on their own leadership as they chose, especially in the moment response before it had structure. That was always the goal. This isn't my thing. This is everyone's thing, and whoever has energy to invest it in, I want to be their assistant, and I want to get out of the way of what they want to do, and accommodate that or go find something else to do. Also, I will say on a more broad sense, who was "we" was 95 percent non-men, maybe higher. And there were a few men, certainly some male-bodied people who would do things or volunteer.

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But as far as the leadership and the energy and the emotional labor, so many amazing femmes and women and just non-men in my life that I've met, and come in and out because volunteership is tough. But just when you look back at the whole collective of people who have been involved, just an extraordinarily small amount of men involved in mutual aid, involved in empathy [laughter], involved in leadership, unless they take it over, which is something. But that's who we were: a group of four people, very different backgrounds. I would say only one of them had really a familiarity with like mutual aid as a concept in an anti-capitalist system of care and support. But they all knew what it meant to organize for our community. And it pretty much stayed that way until the end of August, when we lost a lot of the structural resources.

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Second Harvest's grant ran out. The CARES Act expired. Everyone had to go back to work, and all these things. That was kind of like the shift. That summer was shifting towards other sustainability plans. Even as we knew we were gonna eventually lose access to the temporary food pantry we were able to set up and use with no cost because we were privileged [laughter],

and all the food from Second Harvest, we still knew we would keep going, and whatever that meant. Even as other people have come and gone in an involvement, it still remains a consistent effort where people can plug in on their own terms.

Carly Berlin: I want to come back to that August pivot in a minute.

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But before that, you were talking about that moment where all these sort of larger established institutions had meals to give, but didn't know where to be sending them. And when I interviewed Spirit from Southern Solidarity, they said exactly the same thing. And it also really brought me back to being in the LGBTQ Center on Broad where there were meals from hotels, from wherever. And it was like where are these coming from? There are so many of them. They're going to spoil right away if we don't get them out right now. And I guess I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit more or like, sort of flesh out what exactly was going on then, and sort of the role that you and this group of people was finding that you could fill.

Dan Bingler: It's really infuriating in some ways to look back at how much food [laughter] there was just sitting there.

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We got connected in a few weeks after the start of the pandemic to a local hotel. It's the state shelter hotel, so when there's a natural disaster, that's where they send state employees and stuff. So, that's where the National Guard was staying. That's where the EMTs were staying. That's where the travel nurses were staying for the Convention Center hospital, and that's where the

social workers were staying who were helping the unhoused folks get into hotels. And they hit me up, and they were like, "Hey, we're throwing away a bunch of catered meals every day." I'm like, "What? Don't do that." They're like, "Yeah, so we get catered meals for all these people," paid by taxpayer money, by the way, "and they're not eating them. [laughter] They're just going out and getting their own food or whatever, so they're going to waste every day." And I'm like, "Well, what are we talking?"

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They're like, "Oh, we usually throw about two hundred from breakfast, one hundred and fifty from lunch, and like three hundred from dinner." "Like three hundred what?" "Like catered, individually containered meals from all different kinds of local businesses, good stuff, ribs and stuff, fish, all kinds of stuff, nice, big breakfasts." I was like, "Well, shit, I can come get some sometime." And they're like, "Cool, you can come four times a day." And I'm like, "Well, I can't do that. [laughter] But I'll come when I can." And I started going, and I drive a Prius, which I did not know was basically a small pickup truck until the pandemic.

Carly Berlin: [laughter]

Dan Bingler: But you put those seats down in the back, and I put like five hundred meals into my car. And I would be driving off with all these Styrofoams up to the roof, just me in the driver's seat with just enough elbow room to turn the wheel, and it was insane. It was insane.

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A lot of them we would get out that day. Southern Solidarity would get a lot of the meals. Southern Solidarity, a Black, queer-founded organization. Spirit, as you mentioned, was a founding member. And we always supported them, so that was one of the ways we could do it is let's get them these meals first, and then figure out what else to do with them. But we'd be sending our families catered meals. Eventually, and to get to your question about how were we able to fill a role or what were we able to do is, eventually, we were granted use of a space at a micro school that had been shut down, until the end of the lease. And we filled it up with refrigerators, and then starting keeping all that stuff cold as best we could, and dated it and got it out by a couple days of when we got it, whether that was three hundred meals to Southern Solidarity or two hundred to a couple different groups or we just like got them out to our families. Eventually, the community fridges were a place we could use.

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But it was kind of unsustainable for me to just go get them all these different times of day. So, thankfully, the hotel had walk-in space, so they agreed they would just put everything in the walk-in. And I would come like each morning, seven days a week. Either I or another person but usually me, would drive over to the hotel, go fill up all these catering carts, and take them down. Walk them down to the car, and fill up the car. Sometimes, we had to have two vehicles, there were so many meals. [unrelated conversation]

Carly Berlin: Okay, I'm going to stop this right now.

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Carly Berlin: All right. We are doing a little take two here downstairs at the Unitarian Universalist Church at the corner of Jefferson and Claiborne in New Orleans. I'm Carly Berlin. The date today is May 6th, 2022, and I am here with Dan Bingler. We were just talking about spring of 2020, redistributing meals from kind of larger institutions. And we got interrupted upstairs, and so now I'm trying to remember exactly what thought [laughter] we ended on there.

Dan Bingler: I think I have it.

Carly Berlin: Yeah, okay.

Dan Bingler: The topic being how were we able to fill a role is being a place where that food could be stored safely for just that couple days to find where it could go, getting enough refrigeration to be able to have hundreds of meals not immediately go to waste.

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It was big. And we were trying to find like restaurants and stuff to do it but it was not practical for what we were doing to make those, because then you have another site you have to go to to get the food. [laughter] It needed to be somewhere accessible, and where we were operating from was that. Again, filling that role of being the intermediary between the resources that have no place to go because it wasn't thought through, which I have a lot to say about that, and the need that expressed itself, the self-identified need, because we didn't go round being like, "Are you

hungry? Are you hungry?" We made it so that people could reach out to us and say, "We need food." And it was nice to be able to give people catered meals and stuff.

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But it was, again, infuriating to look at a situation like this where six hundred to seven hundred catered meals— and, eventually, they got it down. Like, a month or two later, it would be down to like two hundred to three hundred extra meals [laughter] a day because they just stopped ordering so much. But for a good solid month and a half, it was like, you couldn't get enough food. And for this to be a structural system where they're like, "Okay, we're going to pay for all of this food for all of these employees, all of these state employees, all these people," and never be like, "But what happens to all the extra food?" And here they all are in their own individual Styrofoam containers. They reached out to me because it was individual hotel workers who were just like feeling terrible about throwing all this food away. Some of them would like go over to like Calliope and Magazine, under the bridge, and hand out some of the meals.

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But that's after a twelve-hour day. They aren't people who are organizing themselves in that way. They just felt so guilty, they like had to do something. It wasn't even the system recognizing that it was failing to get these meals out. It was the workers who were around it who just felt so disgusted with throwing away thousands of meals a week, perfectly good meals that were just paid for and delivered [laughter] to them. It was very difficult to emotionally process, again, that we were able to fill that niche so quickly, and that there was such a lack of structure in

place to actually complete the cycle of— "What about inevitably when a lot of this food is extra?"

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"How do we— ?" Well, you know, someone could've spent two more hours in their week finding a partner to offload that food to. Instead, they ended up relying on random volunteership and my free time and my Prius [laughter] and my friend's pickup truck, where we'd go spend an hour and a half each day collecting and organizing these meals, and getting them over to our HQ. But, also, it was worth it because we didn't have anything else to do, and we were able to get hundreds of meals. There were days when Southern Solidarity— I would call up Jasmine from Southern Solidarity, and be like, "Hey, how many meals do y'all want today? Because I can give you whatever number you want." This is one day Jasmine was like, "Well, three hundred's the most we've ever done in a day." I'm like, "All right, three hundred, I'm sending them to you, not one more either." It's true— in the same way that three hundred meals could be very helpful, three hundred and fifty meals could actually be harmful, especially me supporting Black leadership, a Black organization as a white person.

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As a generally white-bodied organization, I have to take their leadership, and respect what they're asking for. If they wanted four hundred meals, they would've asked for four hundred meals. I got four hundred meals. But if I'd given them four hundred meals, that's beyond their capacity to assist other people. Then, I'm asking those individuals like, "Well, what, you can't figure out what to do with fifty meals apiece?" Suddenly, it's not a shared effort. It's me

offloading what I don't want to deal with to them, and that's why it was so important to me. "You just tell me what you'd like, and I will deliver that, and I don't want to tell you what you're getting ever." That goes from organizations to the individual community members we're trying to support, because really none of us truly know as well as people who are going through things what they need. We think we do.

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We love to think we do. [laughter] But it's so much better just to ask, and just believe them, trust them. Like, "Yeah, you don't need food and bottled water right now? What else? Because I'm sure there are other things. So, I'm not going to bring you food and bottled water because that's not helpful to you right now. But what else is there?" How do we support them telling us what they want [laughter], and just listening?

Carly Berlin: That's a good segue into my next question, which is just who were you serving in that time? How were you getting in touch with people? How were they getting in touch with you? What was the kind of process of assessing those needs?

Dan Bingler: Philosophically speaking, it was always about being good neighbors to all of our neighbors, and inclusively. And that meant making sure that we're being considerate of our unhoused neighbors; making sure we're being considerate of our migrant and undocumented neighbors and refugees neighbors; making sure that we're considerate of our queer and LGBT neighbors.

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Even if that didn't mean we were directly supporting them, because we had a phone line, and we got 1,050 families connected to us through that phone line, which was whew. Like, we had to turn off the phone line. [laughter] So, we had a lot of direct community. But, also, our responsibility was always: support the larger community, not just your direct community, not just who's in your circle. And Southern Solidarity is a great example of that because week one of the pandemic, we got to be there for our unhoused neighbors too, so we start up an unhoused solidarity crew, just a few people doing a couple things. But I had seen Jasmine make a post online about helping the unhoused neighbors, and I had reached out to her. And like a week later, Southern Solidarity had formalized itself, and we connected directly.

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And I was like, "Okay, cool. So, here's what we're gonna do: GNOCC no longer has an unhoused solidarity crew. We just push energy to Southern Solidarity. If people in our network want to help the unhoused people, go learn from Southern Solidarity how to do it. Go seek Black leadership on how to do it." Because that's the thing is, yeah, I want to help unhoused people, but here's people who are already doing it better and with more intentionality than I ever could. So, why would I replicate that? Why wouldn't I just bring energy to do that? And that's how we really tried to work with— we didn't have like an undocumented listing on our thing. We certainly had undocumented families but there was nothing that identified immigration status. So, even that way, it's like we need to support undocumented organizations. But we did that as well. So it's like, support our direct community, the ones we're connected to, support other

mutual aid groups that have emerged out of this, and support the structural organizations that are reaching those marginalized communities.

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And, often, they are under the leadership of those marginalized communities themselves, which is what it should be. [laughter] So, those combined with kind of creating ourselves as an intermediary space for all of that, whether it's for our direct families or these other organizations, or even like smaller mutual aid individuals or affinity groups. It doesn't have to be an organization. It's just how can we share space with all those different groups so that we can keep them posted on what we have available in solidarity?

Carly Berlin: I want to go back to sort of the larger arc of time. We've been talking a lot about the sort of like initial, really acute moment of crisis in the pandemic. But tell me about how the GNO Caring Collecting has evolved over the last two years— over two years now.

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Dan Bingler: It is genuinely crazy to think two years later that we're where we are [laughter] or even that it lasted or became a nonprofit. I didn't know what a nonprofit really was before the pandemic, or even [laughter] in the summer of 2020. [laughter] I didn't really know. But we lost a lot of resources in the fall of 2020, and we offloaded— we connected with our families, and said, "Hey, we're not going to be able to support you the same way." Those who said, "We absolutely still need whatever support you can offer," we kept in our network. And those we couldn't, or didn't need other things, we got connected to like the FEMA meals that were here

for a long time, and things like that, and constricted down to what our capacity was, and just maintained.

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And for about a year, we were able to do that. Like, from the fall of 2020 until fall of 2021, we kept like 100 families on our roster. We kept up with them as best as we could. We lost a lot of the areas. This had been every single neighborhood and zip code in the Greater New Orleans area, all the way from Kenner to Metairie to Chalmette down to Westwego. Like, every different area of New Orleans in like the GNO metropolitan area was served by us in some extent. And, so, we lost a lot of that, and it was just, hey, if we can keep up with these families' emotional support with them, and keep doing groceries once a month, keep our laundry service up for just the small number of families we have, if that's what we are, it's what we are. And we just kind of maintained that mutual aid effort, and kept connected to other people, and connected to what's going on.

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And we were able to get a new space at the First UU church here, and moved in with Southern Solidarity as well, so we were all like in a more connected organizational space. Then Ida happened, and it really changed the trajectory of GNO Caring Collective because we were able to take a lot of those things that we learned in the moment response for COVID into that weather event. And I think part of our success was in the same philosophical vein of recognizing that we needed to seek marginalized leadership, and we needed to support that. In Ida response, it was

we need to go to the River Parishes and to the coastal parishes, and support the people who will be without power for six weeks, because New Orleans is gonna be fine.

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Ida happens on a Sunday. A week later, Monday a week later, power's back on all over New Orleans, and everything you could need to buy is at Lowe's and at the grocery stores. It was still a little tough to get ice and gas itself, but power itself was restored for Orleans Parish. But here's places that, six to eight weeks, they aren't gonna have those resources. How do we organize for those places? This space that we're in now just became a hub for all of the resources. Again, like, we were able to leverage our ability to store things. "Hey, you want to donate stuff? You don't know where it's going to go? Bring it here. You want to donate stuff? You know exactly where it's going to go? You have an organization? Here, I'll put it on y'all's table. No one can take stuff off of that table. It's just Louisiana Coastal Tribes Coalition or Angel's LaPlace krewe."

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Again, whether it was like a whole structural organization or just like an impromptu mutual aid response, we were able to support those individuals. They could take donations, and then bring them here. And then when they were able to go down, they could come back, and pick everything up from here. They didn't have to like operate out of their house. Between all the different groups and donations we were able to get, we moved about $10 million of product in hurricane relief, everything from giant tents from Bonnaroo that got canceled because of Ida, to sleeping bags and pillows, to personal care, to like construction and stuff like tarps and DampRid, Concrobium, stuff I'd never even heard of [laughter], roofing nails and contractor

bags and tools, shovels, rakes, so much stuff, and every different kind of thing someone would need. And we were just able to move so much of it.

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That really completely reshaped what we had going on because the church recognized how much we were doing, and were like, "Well, y'all need more space for this, don't you?" I filled up a whole gymnasium full of hurricane relief supplies, and it kept going out. It wasn't just like coming in. It was like different stuff. [laughter] Like, two weeks later, it'd be a whole thing full of completely different stuff because more people would bring stuff. Anyone could come, and if they were like, "Hey, I need all of these paper towels," and if I'm looking at two hundred rolls of paper towel, I'd say, "Well, look, you can take up to half if you know where it's going." Like, if I got a hundred paper towels, take fifty. If I got two generators, take one. None of it is ours. We're merely holding it well-meaningly but without intentionality because we don't know where it's specifically gonna go. Anytime someone can identify where it needs to go, I'm like, "Boom, yours. You know better than me." Why would I tell you what needs to happen with it?

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Like, you're literally telling me you know three families down the bayou. Each of them needs a generator and a chainsaw? Well, I got one generator and three chainsaws. Go ahead. Everyone needs everything. [laughter] I know how to get it, and I can get it to places and to people. But if someone shows up and is like, "Well, I know exactly where that needs to go," cool. That is better than 99% of everyone trying to do anything, is you can actually tell where it needs to go, not just, "I can get a thing," or "I'd like to help people" in the abstract. But like, "Hey, there's this person.

I want to help. I want to give them this thing." Hell, yeah. Thank you for your leadership. [laughter]

Carly Berlin: Just describe what it was like to be in this space? I'm imagining a lot of this work is probably happening in September like in that month or so after Ida. But what did it feel like to be in here just like moving that amount of stuff out to people?

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Dan Bingler: Mind-boggling. [laughter] I started off with just— I had a U-Haul. I actually was down in Mexico for my first vacation in three years when Ida hit— when it formed and hit. And I was supposed to come back the Tuesday after Ida and, obviously, my flights were canceled. So, I sat there on Monday, looking for, one, a place that I could fly back into the US [laughter], two, where I could already have rented a U-Haul and already paid for a generator. I had to be able to arrive to a place where I knew I had those things, and it ended up being Oklahoma City. [laughter]

Carly Berlin: [laughter]

Dan Bingler: Nowhere in Texas could I find that, so I just went to Oklahoma City, and loaded up Tuesday night, put every kind of supply I could think of, and spent— we had some funds left over that hadn't been spent. And I was like, well, if we spend all this on hurricane relief, that's fine.

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And drove back. Got here Wednesday night. Came into the church Thursday morning to get some things out, and I realized the power was on. [laughter] And, so, I reached out to the church like, "Hey, can I empty my U-Haul into the corner of this gym?" And they were like, "Yeah, sure." A week later, the gym's half full. I didn't work after the hurricane until almost the end of October. I just lived here. Well, I didn't sleep here but it was twelve to fourteen hours a day here, organizing tables, trying to figure out how do I make this make more sense? How can people come in and shop here? How can I set up rolling racks? There's a commercial kitchen, so there was a commercial refrigerated ice machine, and it was filtered. So, we would fill up coolers with bagged ice, and people— it's like, "Do you know where some ice needs to go? Take it." And it just kept growing and growing.

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And as more people realized that someone could drop stuff off here at any time, I'd have like six Metro racks full of stuff that I would need to organize onto the tables, and then I'd need more tables. Then it would mean this stuff actually— why are the diapers over away from the menstrual pads? How do we organize this better? And it just kept becoming more relatable and relatable. Then, suddenly, people are just trying to put like two- to five-thousand dollars of stuff being like, "I don't know where this needs to go." I'm like, "[gasps] I guess here. Wow, that's a lot of stuff." [laughter] It was mind-boggling. Even having already set up a food and supply pantry, this was something new for me. And when the church needed the gym again, they let us move into a whole three different rooms that just weren't being used because there was no in-person service.

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So, then I was even able to make it make more sense. Like, here's the room with food and baby supplies and clothing. And here's the room with personal care and healthcare and basic house goods and repair supplies, and whatever else. And then there was a whole 'nother room where we actually had space for our partner organizations, just like the tables, where it's like this is for your crew. We had a private room where people could store their stuff for when they were going to go do distributions. And it really crystallized from there, just how much of an impact having a space where, again, an intermediary space. Like, it wasn't just for our families, and it wasn't just for organizations. We could have individuals come shop. We could have partners come shop. We could have people say, "Hey, I know someone who needs stuff." Like, "Cool. Come on by."

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And actually, like, making all of that space relatable, where someone could just walk through and be like, "Oh, yeah, that's the kind of stuff I need for that stuff. That's the kind of stuff I need for that stuff." It's not like a shopping center. But if it's all in boxes and bins and inaccessible visually, then it's not as relatable. It all needed to be relatable, whether it's for people who need to identify the stuff they need to take to other people, or people who don't necessarily even know exactly what they need because they're stressed out. It was fun. It was so much fun setting up my own thrift store. [laughter]

Carly Berlin: [laughter] I was going to ask you, you were showing me this before we started this conversation, but can you sort of paint the picture of like what this store, quote, unquote, "free store" is, and kind of the experience of moving through it, for folks?

Dan Bingler: Yeah. We were in these three rooms downstairs, but the church had some office space upstairs that hadn't been used in a while.

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And, so, we negotiated to make this a permanent thing. And we moved thousands and thousands and thousands of pounds of stuff upstairs. [laughter] I say "we." A lot of it was me. [laughter] But a lot of it was other people too, thankfully. But, now, we took— it's like five percent of the hurricane relief stuff we had, plus a bunch of new donations over the past six months, and we were able to set up a walk-through free store of like every basic supply a person could need. You walk through the door. There's all of the food right in front of you. The next thing you see is personal like healthcare and menstrual care. And then you look right past that, there's baby diapers and formula. And then with those basic needs addressed, by the time you start to walk around the room, you see, oh, there's also cleaning supplies and, oh, here's some more like repair stuff, and here's some small kitchen appliances and things like that, like, everything else a person might need on the second tier of needs, not that immediate, "What am I worried about?"

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And walk through to a second room that we're building out to be a clothing boutique, like a real dignified shopping space for people, with hanging racks of clothing, and nice shelves of folded stuff. The whole point of that is that we can get resources out to people. It's good. We can be an intermediary for other groups. It's good. But having a space where people can feel dignified, and choose for themselves, not what we give them but what they themselves feel like they need and

desire, and not gatekeeping it, even unintentionally. Because, ultimately, we gatekeep the things we have by not giving them those things, by saying, "Here's the groceries you get."

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And it's not like we're doing it on purpose. This is a societal thing. It's not, Carly and I are hoarding these things. It's we as a society don't know how to respect the dignified autonomy of another person who is in need. We want to tell them what they need. We want to tell them what they get. But having a space where you literally don't do that, and they can just come, and it's like, "Sure, take two shopping bags of whatever. You can't take four shopping bags of whatever, unless maybe." [laughter]

Carly Berlin: [laughter]

Dan Bingler: "But everyone take two shopping bags of whatever." That's the goal. That's the goal, is creating a space, and fostering that space for everyone, whether it's a person we connect to on a mutual aid Facebook group, where it's like, "Hey, you need these things. If you can come by, we have them."

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And then when they get here, it's like, "Look, if you need anything else, there's an abundance of stuff." None of this stuff is helping anyone right now. It's all just sitting there. Only when the need is identified and connected to is it useful. [laughter] Otherwise, it's a bunch of junk not helping anybody. That whole evolution of having a temporary plan and a temporary space, and leveraging opportunities and resources and moments into something long-term and sustainable,

and even as it grows exponentially, like, I could never— if you had asked me in September if I could ever have imagined that, I would've said never. Even in the same way, like, if you'd asked me in September of 2020, could I have ever imagined that summer where we got that much food out and that many resources, and connected with so many people, I could never have imagined it.

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But even when I could imagine that, I could not have imagined our Hurricane Ida relief work. And now, six months later, I truly— I didn't mean to become a tornado relief coordinator, but I just did that. Fucking tornado. What is a tornado doing in New Orleans? But seeing that evolution into what we are now, and recognizing that it's just about leveraging privilege and relationships, and being able to respond in the moment by identifying needs. If you can identify the need, there's someone out there who's just like desperate to do a nice thing, a helpful thing, and like, "Oh, my god, I have all this food. I don't know what to do with it." Because you've been hoarding all that food [laughter], because you haven't thought all about where should it go. You just thought about where it is. And we are at a place where, like, we have— this is where it is, but also bringing energy to that. Our partners know this is where it is. They can come shop whenever they want.

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If they have families in need, a lot of them just have a lockbox code. They know how to get in. If I have volunteers come here more than once, it's like, "Here's how to get in. Come help anytime. If there's anything you need, it's okay." Mutual aid is ultimately all of this. Mutual aid as community care and support, harm reduction, anti-fascism, these are all connected. These are all

aspects of what we do. And mutual aid is a vehicle for that. And so much of that reminder is like, "Hey, if you're organizing clothing donations, and you see something you love, it's yours. That's what it was meant to be." Like, this isn't just about doing things for abstract people you care—you want to help. It's about doing things for each other and ourselves, together. A lot of people have problems breaking that like, "Oh, I wouldn't want to do that. I'd feel so bad."

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I'm like, "I have one million pieces of clothing to organize. If you come in and you organize a hundred pieces of clothing, take ten of them. Who cares?" There's so much of it. It's our internalized false sense of scarcity that makes people feel guilty. Like, "Man, I shouldn't take this cute shirt that I totally love, even though there's two thousand more shirts here that haven't even been looked at." Take it. Wear it. Love it. Support yourself as you do the work for other people as well, and don't feel guilty about that. Like, literally feel un-guilty about that. Like, you're making 100 PB&J sandwiches for unhoused people? Eat a PB&J. It's delicious. You made it. [laughter] Don't feel like just because that's going to be ninety-nine sandwiches instead of 100 that you aren't valid and don't deserve that same comfort and care that you want to share with other people. In fact, if you don't share it with yourself, then it's not gonna be a healthy exchange.

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You probably aren't actually sharing that with someone. You're asking for validation through those actions, and seeking that. Like, un-seek it.

Carly Berlin: Yeah. Part of what I'm really curious to explore with this project is I think for a lot of folks, the pandemic was the first time they ever heard the term "mutual aid." I've experienced this myself, and seen a lot of people sort of go through this learning curve of the like "solidarity not charity," or however you want to describe what this work is. And you mentioned earlier that when you started the collective, mutual aid wasn't necessarily something that you had done or were familiar with in like that particular way. And I'm curious to hear more about your own learning curve. That's not exactly the right term. But do you get what I'm getting at?

Dan Bingler: Well, I was familiar with mutual aid—

Carly Berlin: Okay, sorry.

Dan Bingler: —as an organizer. But a lot of the other people I was organizing with weren't exposed to that terminology, necessarily, but certainly weren't like—

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Like, I can articulate at this point in my life, I am an anarcho-syndicalist. I don't believe in hierarchy. I believe in community and organizing together, and in sustainable systems of respect and dignity. And mutual aid is a part of that. It's a part of harm reduction. It's a part of re-engineering the mind to think in an anti-capitalist way where we don't need to profit off of each other. We don't even need to exchange things. We don't even need to barter things. We can just give. Like, I give. There. I'm not worried. I'm not even thinking about it. I'm not thinking about what's coming back to me. I'm not thinking about how people interpret my give. I'm not

thinking about what do I stand to gain from it. It's just there. Like, I can do a thing. I want to do a thing.

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And then, ideally, but certainly in the concept of mutual aid itself, that comes back around, and not like karma but like because you're fostering an environment in your life and community where other people are going to feel the same way where they're not like, "Ooh, I have to be reciprocative. Like, this person gave this thing. I have to do something in return." But like it makes you more excited to think, what could I give back? As I receive community, what could I bring into community? How could I participate in a mutually compassionate system that doesn't actually rely on any specific result or reaction? And my growth [laughter], I definitely didn't have that language ten years ago for mutual aid, even though I knew the concept even back then. But, to your point, the pandemic very much brought out the term "mutual aid" [laughter] into the forefront, I think, of a lot of people's minds where they hadn't heard it before, and to its detriment in some ways.

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I think, again, when I describe "mutual aid" as an explicitly anti-capitalist concept, some people don't agree necessarily, or just haven't thought about it. Like, "What do you mean? How is it not related to that?" "Well, because it's like against the entire concept." [laughter] It's an anti-capitalist thought because it doesn't work in capitalism. If you're not exploiting that person, and taking from them, and you're actually giving back, what? That's bad business. Any business school will tell you that right now. It sucks too because [laughter] the other day I saw this

Sheriff's Office Facebook page or Instagram post, talking about "Sheriff's Office Mutual Aid." [laughter] No, that's a complete misunderstanding of the term, or insidious co-opting of the term; one or the other. I'm assuming they just don't know what the hell they're talking about. [laughter]

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In some ways, that's dangerous for the concept itself because Sheriff's Office can't do mutual aid. It's just not a thing. First of all, you're coming from an inherently power structure system that's— you're like the only people who aren't on the same level as everyone else. [laughter] That's just not what mutual aid means. Also, what in the fuck does the Sheriff's Office need? What do they need from community? [laughter] "Oh, hey, we want to help you, but help us." Like, no, fuck off. [laughter] But that's neither here nor there. The watering down of the meaning of the concept is, I think, it's unfortunate and it's dangerous because people need to understand that this is inherently anti-capitalist by its very nature, again, because it explicitly rejects the notion that we barter for the things we need.

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No, we just share the things we need with each other because we care about humanity. Simple as that.

Carly Berlin: One of the other things I want to loop back to is it seems like so many groups that sprung up during the pandemic kind of had infrastructure in place when Ida happened, to be able

to really scale up. And I was kind of hearing you describe that. And I guess I'm wondering if you could just elaborate on what that looked like a little bit more.

Dan Bingler: Yeah. It really helped me a lot to refine some of the things that we did at the beginning of the pandemic, and about outreach. How do you identify people's needs? How do you track the information to be able to like, put together a response? How do you connect volunteers to opportunities for volunteership, specific direct things they can do that are relatable and manageable?

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And I'll even go further because the tornado taught us a lot too. The hurricane, I can tell you week one needs, week four needs, week six needs, like, if you're trying to go to a community, and bring supplies to them, what are they practically going to be asking for. You can go somewhere week four of a hurricane with bottled water. Everybody's got bottled water and peanut butter, protein snacks. Like, they've been coming there for four weeks, so what else could you actually show up with? Maybe you just ask them. But the tornado, for example, taught me what are the day one needs, because I wasn't here the first few days of the hurricane. So, when you're trying to get out to assess community and what their needs are, what's the best way to do that, day one, two, and three?

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As each event has happened, it's reinforced me [laughter] and my understanding that this is what my life's work is, is being a disaster aid coordinator for a mutual aid collective, whether that's an

in-the-moment disaster or an ongoing [laughter] eternal disaster. Being able to have basic systems in place of how do you fill out basic info about someone in need? How can you visualize on a map where they are? How can you double-back with them, and connect with them again to check back and see what's changed for you in these weeks? What could we possibly do for you now? Or what can we know for the future when we connect back with you the next time something happens, just so that we have a familiarity with each other? All of those efforts that worked so well in 2020 were so much easier in 2021 for Ida.

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And then, truly six months later, when the tornado hits, we who had connected during Ida relief work were so much more integrated with each other. We've built so much more community. Even as we're all autonomously doing things within different spheres of the community, and are all likely operating at or above personal capacity, we were really able to key in with other, and see what each other were doing, and complement that during the tornado relief, which gives me great hope for the next weather event because we are going to be more prepared than we've ever been. I started off Ida with no supplies. Right now, I have tarps and nails and all of the stuff to get rid of mold, and all the things we need to immediately start responding to people's needs.

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We don't have to build up those supplies. And then we can tell people, "Hey, we just used 20 tarps. Donate 30 tarps." It's easy to get stuff replaced if you move it. Again, identifying the need, that is the real challenge. That's the real coup de grâce. Just got to find the people, and have them self-identify their needs, and then go to everyone else and be like, "Hey, I got eleven people who

need groceries this week." Some of the people are like, "Well, I already said I wanted to get groceries to someone." [laughter] Like, "Okay, cool. Here's the person. Do it [laughter] or just Venmo them. Just give them cash." [laughter]

Carly Berlin: I'm wondering if you can just talk a little bit about specific moments throughout the whole last two years that we've been talking about that stick out as especially rewarding or as especially challenging.

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Dan Bingler: There have been countless incredibly rewarding moments, some so infinitesimal as barely a moment, and some that are living with me forever, and many challenges too. But it's kind of [laughter] the same answer for both. The greatest joy I had was like the first few days of the pandemic when you'll be like taking groceries to someone, and I only knew like ten families or twenty families, and you're helping someone directly, and it's meaningful. Part of what we do has to always be being on the ground, even if I'm not the one delivering groceries every time. I do it every once in a while just to be reminded of that direct action.

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And it was just so meaningful because, like, people didn't expect to be cared for. They didn't expect support. They were so used to not receiving it already, like, why should they expect it now when things are even worse? So, it was a deeply gratifying feeling to be in community with my neighbors in a way I had never been before, and humbling myself towards them. And then there's the other side of it, which is, like, there is a maximum number of people that it can feel

good to help. [crying] And then whatever that number is, everything after that feels terrible. You're not helping them, but like that many people need it, and that you have somehow got enough privilege or resources or a combination of that, that you can help that many people.

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Like, it shouldn't be that way. It shouldn't. You look at ten families on a spreadsheet, and it's nice because you're like, cool, these are the people I'm helping. You look at a thousand families on a spreadsheet, and it just hurts to see that need, that identified need, which is good, identify the need but like, fuck, it really weighs on you. And I think really, for me, one thing that's kept me grounded is trying to keep in mind, for myself at least, that every single one of those families has to be just as important as all of them, otherwise you lose the perspective. If you can't help one family, it doesn't matter what you do for a thousand families. Like, if you can't really be there, if you can't do— it's only meaningful in a long-term way.

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Like, we can't just drop off food, and disappear. We can't always maintain relationships, because that's a matter of capacity, especially as a volunteer organization. I've never gotten a dollar for this, and we've had a few temporary employees through a grant program last year, but it was always going to end. That's the most gratifying and the most challenging thing at once. As far as what else comes to mind, I have a really wonderful anecdote about tornado relief work. We would identify families' individual needs, and try to address them. And we got connected to a family who had two young boys. It was one of their birthday coming up, or something. No, I

didn't even know that then. Sorry. So, we got connected, a family, two young boys. The boys needed clothing.

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They lost like all of their clothing. So, myself and another volunteer went through everything we had here, and got them together some stuff. And they needed shoes. We actually found a pair of Air Jordans that had been donated for one of the kids. We were like, oh, shit, the other kid's going to be so jealous, because they were like a nice, clean, white pair of Air Jordans for an eight-year-old. And got him another— he had two pairs of shoes that fit him, and the other kid didn't have any. So, we were like, you know what? Let's go to Walmart and buy him some shoes. Like, we got some money. It's fine. We don't want him to have no shoes. We can't give two shoes to one kid, and no shoes to the other. They'll be fighting forever. So, we go to Walmart, pick out a regular pair of sneakers. And then we're looking around and we're like, you know what? We're going to get some light-up shoes. Those look cute. The first one we find is like the monster truck Grave Digger, and we're like, "Oh, that's cute." I'm like, "Maybe Grave Digger's not the right vibe for right now."

Carly Berlin: [laughter]

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Dan Bingler: We don't know this family. [laughter] The volunteer's like, "Yeah, yeah, you're right." So, we keep looking, and we find a Spider Man one. We're like, "Oh, hell, yes. Spider Man, light-up eyes. This is perfect. This is everything." So, we get those, and we go drop them

off. Family's super gracious, of course, and we're in the middle of a tornado area. It was very wholesome. My volunteer friend and I waited until we got back to the car away from everyone to like just give each other a hug, and be like, that was so nice. First thing is, we found out later that they had specifically requested Marvel stuff, and even more specifically Spider Man. We had no idea. We just like felt compelled to get the Spider Man shoes. So, that was like really lovely to know that we had not only fulfilled that request but like to the exact minutiae of that six-year-old's desires. Then to cap off this lovely anecdote, we, as I spoiled before, found out it was actually his birthday coming up in a few days, and they were going to celebrate it.

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And, so, Ilona, the volunteer, she went, and we bought him a birthday present. Here's some little Spider Man action figure or something, just whatever. But it was really, really special to be able to, again. You bring the things people specifically ask for and need, and then something a little extra that ends up being exactly what they wanted [laughter], and then going back and dropping something off for his birthday to say like, "Hey, we really do care. We weren't just here dropping this off this one time. We want y'all to feel in community." Then the only other challenge that I truly had besides overcoming my own, in an ongoing fashion, overcoming my own limitations as a white person and as a man, a male-bodied person to have the humility and understanding to see the vision of other people in my life, and their leadership, and support that in a better and better fashion.

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That will always be a challenge. [laughter] But, other than that and the sadness of dealing with the need of so many, fucking bureaucracy is the greatest challenge. Overcoming the red tape and lines people want to put in front of desperate people who need access to basic support resources, it's crazy. It's staggering. Not to use the term "infuriating" too many times but, wow, it was just absolutely enraging just to see how many blocks there are that not even a pandemic could knock out of place. Sad. And it just goes to remind me that most of these systems are in place not to get people access to these resources but to gatekeep them from people we don't think deserve them enough.

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Carly Berlin: Can you talk maybe in a little more specifics? Is it like eligibility requirements for people to be getting aid from certain places? What does that look like in practice? And I guess the other thing I'm sort of thinking about is like I've observed mutual aid being able to be so much more nimble in getting things to people. And you don't have to go through the whole process and make sure that you know where every dollar is going so you can show it to the grant funders so you can please them, or whatever it might be.

Dan Bingler: You kind of said it all. Eligibility requirements, making it so people have to have this, this, and this to be able to access something that's like, "Here's a week of groceries once a month." [laughter]

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It's a lot. It's a lot to get people registered for these things, and they have to have all these extra documents, and things have to line up just right. And if the goal is really to get people supplies, it should be about breaking down the bureaucracy and things that prevent it from happening. But it seems like there's always another requirement around the corner to prevent some portion of people from getting just a tiny, little basic access to it. Mutual aid cuts through bureaucracy very well because it's about direct action. And, ultimately, again, if you can't identify the need, then you're not helping anybody. And mutual aid is nimble like that. We get down into the ground, into the community. As I've tried to look at it, like, I started off doing direct action mutual aid.

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And then I was asked to go one level up into the support network of the direct action and mutual aid, and start coordinating operations and start getting resources for the people doing the direct action. Now, this may seem like a leadership role. There's leadership everywhere. But the reality is it's a support role. [laughter] The leadership is on the ground. One level up is support. I'm supporting their leadership. I'm trying to find other things for them to use. They know where it's going. I don't. I'm not the leader. [laughter] It's as simple as that. It's actually a reverse hierarchy. Like, the farther you go up into this bureaucratic type network, which we're not a bureaucracy but you interact with it ultimately, the less you have of an understanding of what's materially happening to people.

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What is actually going on in their lives, and experiences in their street, on their block, in their neighborhood? And part of it, I'm sure, is not having to please a funding apparatus where it's

like, “Oh, well, I need to get more money, so I need to present this a certain way.” The family information, I have like household numbers on all these people, six thousand people we were helping in 2020. I never used that to raise any money. It’s people. It’s their lives, their information. If people want to support us we can explain our impact, and we can explain some direct measurables in like pounds of food and stuff. But there’s something about, again, when you have a thosuand families on a spreadsheet, either they’re a thosuand families or they’re a spreadsheet.

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And you can’t have it both ways, just because we internalize a lot of that shit. Maybe we want to have it both ways. I’m not telling you you’re not allowed to. I’m just saying you won’t have it both ways. You will either keep the perspective of all of these are people who have individual needs, and they aren’t a funding mechanism, and they aren’t an abstract notion of our nonprofit reach. They are a thousand families. That bureaucratic methodology doesn’t allow for that because it has to be, well, how am I getting my executive director paid next year if we don’t do exactly what this particular grant wants or this particular grant wants? Then go be creative, and go find money that doesn’t have that kind of bullshit attached to it.

Carly Berlin: Is your role at this point that kind of support role? What is your involvement right now?

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Dan Bingler: Well, it shifts. I've always just been kind of doing whatever other people aren't doing [laughter], whatever needs to be done the most that no one else is doing. There are times where it's been twenty-five people making decisions together or autonomously. There are times where it's been four of us. There are times where it's been three of us. There are times where it's just me, and waiting, stewarding this until more amazing leadership comes in that has capacity, and almost always femme. [laughter] Almost always. Practically always. Even now, at the beginning of the tornado, I had two other people. I had a marketing coordinator and a fundraising coordinator, neither of which really had capacity to do that at that time.

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One of them had just lost a job, and had her car stolen. And the other was living with a schizophrenic-episodic roommate, and going through a lot of personal stuff. So, they were there but they weren't involved. No one else but me has been involved from the network side since then, so I've been coordinating volunteership and doing everything. But, again, it's not mine. It's just— I'm taking care of it. And there are already other people who I've met. I just had a second meeting today with a volunteer who wants to be very involved and do a lot. That may or may not work out. But there will always be those positions for people to show up and say, "I want to lead. I want to lead in this way." And I'm like, "Yeah, you should do that. [laughter] How can I support you?" So, ultimately, I'm always support for everyone who wants to do stuff, and has capacity for it. And if no one has capacity, then my capacity is malleable.

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I have a lot of privileges, I have a lot of security in my life, and I can spend more time doing things as they need to be done because this is an incredibly important thing. It's amazing, the amount of resources we have access to, and the community organizations and partnerships that we have that will make this meaningful for years to come, and so we just have to maintain that.

Carly Berlin: How many hours would you say you spend a week on this work compared to your day job?

Dan Bingler: It changes. Again, it depends on the situation. Like I said, after the hurricane, I was here seven days a week, twelve to fourteen hours a day for the better part of a month and a half; almost two months. But it definitely calmed down after that.

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[unrelated conversation] Until the tornado, it probably got down to like I'd be here five to ten hours a week, at the most, and part of that was my work in Southern Solidarity as well. Since the tornado, and especially because we got a lot of volunteership attention, I've been here probably twenty, twenty-five hours a week, minimum, just my off days. And then some days I work, I come in early for a couple hours, and do some stuff. And some days, I come and be less productive than it might sound. Sometimes, I'm just sitting in my office like reading news and stuff. And then I get back up though, and I'm like, oh, my god, look at this amazing place I'm in. Let me go do some work. Let me go organize some clothing. Let me go organize some food donations. Let me think about how to get some funds to make us more sustainable in a way that doesn't compromise our integrity or mission.

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But it is my life's work. I have a paying gig. [laughter] I'm a bartender, and that takes care of a lot of it, and gives me a chance to talk to other people about the work I do, about what's really important to me. It's very sustainable for me. I certainly, at this point, figure I'm probably going to have to find a way to pay myself part-time to do this because it's so important to have people here, and I'm already doing it twenty hours a week now. [laughter] But it doesn't feel like that. It's really meaningful work, and it's just gratifying. It's gratifying to be in community with people, gratifying to have connected all these resources together, and gratifying to keep finding ways to identify community needs, and meet them.

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Carly Berlin: I have like two more questions before we wrap. But I don't think you'd mentioned. What does your involvement with Southern Solidarity look like?

Dan Bingler: Well, I've been a member since we first found out about them. And when I was telling everyone else to go join, I did as well. And we have always been connected. GNOCC has always been connected with Southern Solidarity. It used to be like seven days a week, six days a week that we would go out to unhoused camps and communities, and serve meals and supplies and everything else anyone might need that we could provide, whether it was helping them get their food stamp cards. We even went out and got them their tax returns so they could get their stimulus checks. That was interesting. It's been down to about a day a week since the beginning of the year, maybe probably even a little before.

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So, my role has been just kind of supporting the distribution that's happening, making sure that they have to spend less time prepping, like, get volunteers or I'll do it myself, to get meals ready for them. Try to get more drivers in. Get it more sustainable. It's back up to two days a week now consistently, and we're taking requests. At least we're doing it, and it will keep going on, and we will keep bringing supplies to unhoused folks. That's a really big deal to me. A lot of BIPOC leadership is pretty tapped out. So, thankfully, I have close relationships with many of them, and they've generally entrusted me to steward a lot of this prep effort and consistency, and just make sure that— GNOCC is its own thing. Southern Solidarity's its own thing. We're very much interconnected. Everything we do for our community members, they do for the unhoused.

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And everything they do for the unhoused, we do for our community members as best we can, just in an extended way, and under their leadership for unhoused people. Even when the tornado happened, and I was like, "Hey, y'all, we're getting a lot of attention. I'd really like to center Southern Solidarity in this since y'all have always been the leadership of unhoused efforts, and these people are unhoused. People who ain't got no house no more are unhoused [laughter], at least for the time being."

Carly Berlin: Yeah, that makes sense. Thanks for clarifying just sort of the relationship between two groups. What are your hopes and visions for the future of mutual aid in New Orleans?

Dan Bingler: I hope it keeps emerging as an identity for people to understand, this is community; community care and support. It's not help.

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It's not charity. It's us taking care of each other for each other and ourselves. It's compassion. It's being an actually caring neighbor, and not just pretending to be a caring neighbor. And it is anti-fascist. It is struggling against systems of oppression; explicitly struggling against systems of oppression. We wouldn't need mutual aid if there weren't systems of oppression separating people from the resources they should rightly possess. So, I hope that New Orleans learns more about the true ethics of mutual aid, why we organize this way, why we have to organize this way because we certainly should not have to organize this way [laughter], and what it really means to do harm reduction.

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Like, we're not out here saving anybody. We're just trying to mitigate the damage that's being done actively and, through that, build relationships and actual solidarity towards things that could be political education, civil rights education, healthcare rights education. It has to start somewhere, and you can't just drop a thing off, and think that's mutual aid or compassionate. You really have to be there. You have to keep going there. You have to keep checking back, and build that neighborly rapport. And in New Orleans, if anywhere else, New Orleans should know this.

Carly Berlin: Anything else that I haven't asked that you want to include?

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Dan Bingler: It feels pretty comprehensive. You know I love to talk, so I can think of something else. But I don't know of anything that I haven't expressed about pandemic mutual aid in New Orleans that I need to. I will just say there have been an incredible number of different groups and people doing mutual aid on many different levels. Like I said, sometimes, it's like a group of two people. Sometimes, it's five people. [laughter] Sometimes, it's the whole punk community. [laughter] And all of these things are important on all different levels. There's no right or wrong way— no, I'm sorry. There are wrong ways to do mutual aid because you really have to center the dignity of the people you're trying to assist. But there's no rightest way of doing mutual aid. It's not like one model is the way to do it. We need small groups. We need big groups. We need people who are willing to interact with structural organizations.

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We need people who are willing to completely ignore structural organizations. All of those things are important. Diversity of tactics is gonna get the goods.

Carly Berlin: I think that's good enough to end on. [laughter] Awesome.

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[End]