



Ida Aronson

Thibodaux, LA

Date: June 6, 2022

Location: Aronson's back porch in Thibodaux

Interviewer: Carly Berlin

Transcription: Sharp Copy Transcription

Length: 1 hour, 3 minutes

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

0:00:00

Carly Berlin: My name is Carly Berlin. The date today is Monday, June 6, 2022. We are in Thibodaux, Louisiana at Ida's home, and I'm going to be interviewing Ida for this project about mutual aid and food in New Orleans and South Louisiana during the pandemic and after Hurricane Ida. So first things first, would you mind just introducing yourself for the recorder, tell me your full name, pronouns, a little bit about who you are and what you do.

Ida Aronson: Sure. I'll start with my introduction in our traditional language. [Speaking Houma language] Hello. My name is Ida Aronson. I'm a member of the United Houma Nation and . . . hi. [Laughter]

0:00:59

Carly Berlin: Awesome. Would you mind saying pronouns?

Ida Aronson: Oh, yes. I use they, them pronouns. Thank you.

Carly Berlin: And would you mind just sharing your date of birth for the record?

Ida Aronson: Sure. March 31, [19]88. So I'm thirty- . . . four. [Laughter]

Carly Berlin: Awesome. Tell me about where you born, where you grew up. We'll start there.

Ida Aronson: Okay. I actually didn't grow up here per se. I grew up up north. My dad is from Boston. My mom is from down here, but she was adopted away but she found home later. And I

kind of grew up in the middle at first, so I started in Maryland and then moved up to Massachusetts. And then, I would spend summers either down here in Montegut, Louisiana, or over in Houston with my mom's adopted family.

0:01:58

Carly Berlin: And it sounds like you had sort of a variety of homes growing up but take me back to your childhood home a little bit, whichever one you feel called to go back to.

Ida Aronson: [Laughter] Okay. I moved a lot as a kid so it's kind of hard to pinpoint things. We moved around with the economy, so when we were in Maryland we were there because the economy was booming, business was great for my parents. My dad's historic, I guess, familial job is floor laying. So my dad does it, my grandfather did it, his father did it, et cetera. And I just remember forests, playing in the streams, going outside, running around, being a little hooligan. And I was actually getting in trouble when we were living in Maryland, so we ended up moving away 'cause I was getting in too many fights and stuff and my parents wanted me to focus on education.

0:02:59

So we moved up to Massachusetts when I was in middle school and there, then it was still just running around outside. We were closer to the water so I would go back behind the neighborhood and there was cranberry bogs. I'd run through the cranberry bogs. I'd go over to the ocean and to the tide pools and stuff and see the creatures that were lurking in tide pools. Water has always been close to my heart. It's something that's close to our family and we have never not lived near the water in some way or another.

Carly Berlin: And when did you come down to live here?

Ida Aronson: I'll start a little bit back before then. 2016 happened. Standing Rock happened. I was already deep into activism world doing all sorts of different activism up north, be it, like, queer rights, because Massachusetts was the first place for gay marriage. When I was in high school, I remember fighting through that, et cetera.

0:04:01

So after Standing Rock happened, I doubled down on, like, this is important. This is the things that I need to be actually focusing on. When I'm looking at the intersections of activism, this place, Louisiana, and indigenous activism keep coming up and I need to be there. In 2018 I came down here during the month of March to do activism and to help against the Bayou Bridge Pipeline and to connect with my family and reconnect with other tribal members who were doing this work. And then, the next year, in 2019, we ended up moving down here full-time after things in Massachusetts got— we had two houses in a row sold out from under us. The gentrification and economy up there is way different, and so it was actually literally cheaper for me to put two months down on a house and move cross-country than it would've been to put first-last deposit on a new place up there. [Laughter]

0:05:04

Carly Berlin: Damn. [Laughter] And before we really go into sort of pandemic, just tell me about how you fill your time.

Ida Aronson: Whew. [Laughter] I am very diverse in my indigenous revitalization efforts so to fill my time daily— it's very complicated, I guess. [Laughter] Originally, my career is in

entertainment technology. I'm a lighting designer. I do it for theater, for convention spaces and such, so I do gig work with that, but I'm also heavily involved in a variety of organizations.

Houma Language Project I've been involved with since late 2017, early 2018.

0:06:00

Bvlbancha Collective work, which is an indigenous mutual aid organization that I helped cofound. Okla Hina Ikhish Holo, which is a Gulf area indigenous gardeners' network that started. I currently work gigs with Power Shift Network, which is an organization that brings youth into environmentalism, into the fight. And I also work with Alternate ROOTS, which is another arts organization that works with arts and activism, and getting people to speak and create their lives, I guess, toward change. And so I just kind of overlay and interact and intersect all areas of my art and activism and my indigenous life and also my queer life, and all of these different things I just kind of shove into a box. [Laughter]

0:07:01

Carly Berlin: Awesome. Well, take us back to March of 2020. What did your mutual aid work look like in that early period of the pandemic? I know you were telling me on the phone recently about this garden that you helped create, but wherever you want to start is great.

Ida Aronson: Sure. 2020 was a big year. My friends and I got together in January of 2020 to create Bvlbancha Collective. It just really called to us. A couple of us had taken a herbalism class together and then we just started talking and talking with friends and they were, like, "Yeah, let's do this thing. Cool. Whatever." Then March hit and that was when the pandemic hit at least the

New Orleans area, the Bvlbancha area, and we were, like, “Cool, I guess that was a good idea to do.” [Laughter] So I had wanted to create a gardening space.

0:07:59

Some of us have homes and spaces to work out of, some of us do not. Some of us are just renting. So being able to have this place where we could reconnect with the land, grow things that we needed for our mutual aid to be able to get that out to people, and just work with the land and with ourselves and with our other community members was really important to us. So March of 2020 I, being entertainment technology, lost my job. The last time I really worked in that industry was March 3 or 4 of 2020. I’ve taken a couple gigs since then but not much. And so I went to the chief of the United Houma Nation. I knew that there was this piece of property, and I asked if I could start this farm and he was, like, “Yeah. Okay. Whatever. Sure.” [Laughter] So I started, and I actually have a picture here with these six hand-done plots.

0:08:59

I had the little garden ripper thing, so I got these little— they were probably eighteen-inch in diameter circle plots, and we had the three sisters, which is corn, squash, beans. And then, I had some other little random seeds, like this one was an Armenian cucumber so it’s kind of actually a melon. It’s very sweet and tasty. And I just had these little plots that were going. I did this all out of my own money, and eventually I had my husband, Brandon, working on grants and stuff and he was actually the grant writer. So he was able to get these grants and we were able to get a little bit of money back. I was able to get paid back for the tools that I bought, for instance. And then, the next step was I made a raised bed. The raised bed is eight foot by eight foot, and then I

started planting stuff in there. And it was definitely just step by step that we grew things in the garden. I'm also not a gardener. [Laughter] I do not have a huge background in it.

0:10:00

My mom has always done peppers and tomatoes every year but I'm not a gardener, I'm a lighting designer. So I was also doing research. It was mostly me alone at first and my husband would come help, as well. So I was doing this gardening, I was doing this research, and what I really wanted to focus on was revitalizing these indigenous ways of working with the land. And not so much forcing the land to my will but working with the land using the things that are already there and planting around that in harmony so that way things can grow and be sustainable to their best ability. Because of climate change the land and the weather is changing so rapidly and so fast these plants sometimes, especially if they're not from here, aren't able to keep up. So if we can sustain these plants, which get better in the land that they're in as you do seed saving every year, seed after seed— if we can grow together, then hopefully we can weather this together.

0:11:07

But otherwise, the plants are not doing super well. Our seasons are all out of whack. I hear all sorts of issues about the squash flowers aren't coming out at the same time and so we're not getting good squash crops. My reality here is that I'm completely surrounded by sugarcane and that land that I was working was also completely just burnt out from sugarcane so it's also helping revitalize and put nutrients back into the soil, which was all totally new to me.

[Laughter] I'm just, like, uh, I don't know. I'll figure it out I guess one article at a time. I'll read

an article— like, great, I learned a new thing! — or learn from an elder or learn from some other group source. And to that point I guess I can go into we created Okla Hina Ikhish Holo, which is an intertribal group of indigenous gardeners that range from down Pointe-aux-Chênes up and around the Gulf all the way over right now to Alabama.

0:12:03

My friend has a farm in Alabama called Hummingbird Springs, and we have created these variety of gardens to be able to do circular economies, to be able to grow different kinds of plants in different biomes, to do seed saving and seed sharing. So maybe somebody's growing something here but I can't grow that because seasonally it doesn't work out for me here, whatever, we can trade seeds, we can trade produce, we can trade whatever it is we need. And we have a couple of forests going, as well, food forests. I have the food forest here. This is very early 2021 that we did at the Yákani' Ékelanna' farm which is what the farm is for the Houma Nation. Yákani' Ékelanna' means "the land between," so it was technically between Bayou Cane and Bayou Blue but in a greater sense our land is in between the Mississippi and the Atchafalaya Rivers.

0:13:04

So our area is called Yakani' Tcetu', which is "the big land," and that's the land in between those two parts of the delta. Where else can I go with this? [Laughter] We ended up getting chickens at Yákani' Ékelanna'. We had a mushroom forest that was going to be coming in, and we were going to have a foraging path so you could make a path through the woods, there would be the mushrooms on one side. There's all sorts of stuff that's already growing in the forest. There was

honeysuckle; there was dewberries; the blackberries; maypop, which is also known as passion fruits; wild onions. These things were already there so how can we just kind of remind people that these things are already there; here's what you're looking for. And you can just go out and get your own food. [Laughter] It's cool! It's great.

0:13:59

I guess also an additional point is that we are a food desert which is really sad and frustrating because we're a swamp. We're in the middle of the swamp. We have all this food and resources around us, but it's poisoned. The oil and gas industry is a reality. It's everywhere. There's always oil slicks. Whenever I go out, I see them in various places. And those are the things that we really have to deal with is this reality of oil and gas poisoning the land and our people, and how do we overcome it, I guess, personally is how I feel about it.

Carly Berlin: I want to go back to just sort of learning how to garden in that moment early in the pandemic. I have been really curious to ask people about, like, what role was that filling for you in that moment of just so much uncertainty?

0:15:00

Ida Aronson: For me it was just survival. It's learning a skill that undeniably I have to learn. I have to learn how to create food. One of the first things that happened during the pandemic is that the tribe got a shipment of food from Second Harvest, which I'm really thankful for that food but also our reality is that the food that we got— and this got fixed later, but the food that we first got, most of the fresh food was rotten. We threw out an amazing amount of fresh food that was just rotten that we couldn't do anything with. We got these bags of chicken that were

entirely salt covered, and our people are very high rates of diabetes and various health risks, and so you're giving people with diabetes and heart conditions an amazing amount of salted, bad meat. It was actually bad. It was past the expiration date. [Laughter] It was, like, cool! Great! Thanks for the food. We're really hungry and we really need this, but it really shown on. . . when the apocalypse comes, or however you're gonna phrase it, we are going to be relying right now on food that is given to us because we don't have this food sovereignty and we don't have this food sustainability already in place.

0:16:10

So if we don't have these things already in place, how are we going to have fresh foods and produce and things that we need to overcome sickness, because that takes time. And I feel like people have really gotten far from the reality that, at the end of the world, we're not going to be able to go to the supermarket. [Laughter] You have to grow it and then craft it and then process that to make sure that you're gonna have food throughout the year. And we have fallen so far from that for a variety of reasons, but we need to get back to it.

And so it was being able to do this in solidarity and friendship with my community, with my friends, and being able to do this together and realizing that we're not alone, we have community, we have each other.

0:17:00

Each of us has different pieces of knowledge to create a whole picture. And so, even though I wasn't a gardener, I was able to correlate and correspond with my friends and such, and we're still doing that, to make things grow and to figure it out and to test and whatever. I don't know if

you saw, but as you were coming in there's a bunch of bins of trees and foods and stuff. That's what I was kind of doing— is I'll put it in a bin and then I'll move it around and I'll see where it does the best. So, like, great, it loves it there. I'm gonna put it there. [Laughter]

Carly Berlin: I was admiring the peppers when I walked in. [Laughter] Tell me about how this Gulf Coast network of farms and food forests came together.

Ida Aronson: Yeah, sure. It is actually in partnership with WECAN International which is— oh, God— Women Empowering . . . something. [Laughter] I'm sorry, WECAN International. Y'all are great and I forgot your acronym.

0:18:00

So Monique Verdin, who is part of Another Gulf is Possible, and WECAN, Osprey Orielle Lake, head of WECAN, came together and approached Bvlbancha Collective as, like, “Hey, we want to do this project. We realize all of these different corresponding things are happening and we need to create this self-sustaining network that is based in indigenous knowledges. We see that you're already doing the work. Do y'all want to come play with us,” kind of thing. [Laughter] And so we were, like, “Yeah, absolutely!” And so we helped kinda anchor that. And since then we have Ms. Tammy, who created the medicine wheel garden at University of Southern Mississippi, who is a Houma elder, who is just amazing. I always tell her, “I want to be you when I grow up. I love you so much!” And who else did we partner with? We have one of Monique's cousins, I believe, is part of it who is down Pointe-aux-Chênes.

0:19:00

The Yákaní' Ékelanna' garden was part of it. The gardens that make up the gardens of the members of Bvlbansha Collective, so there's Train Beach. Angela has Hummingbird Spring Farms, which is thirty-one acres out in Alabama that she literally just got actually USDA recognized as a farm, and she's part of the Alabama Sustainable Environmental Network. Who else was part of that originally? Ms. Tammy. Ms. Anne White Hat ended up joining with us. She owns Maypop Herb Shop right now. She's the first Lakota-owned herbalism apothecary, I believe, in the country. Who else? And just some other comrades. We have people out in Baton Rouge, and we have people that kind of come and go as their ability and attention is able to uphold it.

0:20:01

But regardless, we're still connected and setting things in motion and planning for a future that is less sustainable than it is right now. So we are also actively working on land as a safe place to go for all of us, just creating this safety and backups and plans to be able to get out of just surviving also and move into thriving. We have a monthly meeting. We're still in communication. And it's really cool that people are able to also just talk about and be supported in the things that they want to pursue also within gardening. So we have people doing— they'll give a talk about food preservation or food canning or something.

0:20:59

Or we'll talk about how to build something. Just skill shares and stuff like that.

Carly Berlin: I'm curious for the garden that you started, where was the food going?

Ida Aronson: The food was always gonna go to elders and to our people who just don't have anything, or just anybody from our tribe. And then, outside of that, just anybody in the neighborhood. It was a pretty low-income neighborhood and so the ultimate ideation for myself was that this is food for people to eat. This was not supposed to be a way to make money; it was supposed to be a way to feed our people. And then, outside of that, there were things that I was trying to think of to be able to generate income. So for instance, the pawpaw is a fruit. It's very, very soft. It's really rare.

0:21:59

It used to be very prolific, especially in the early nation state building and all that. But because it's so soft you can't transport it. So I have started a pawpaw forest on the land. And what I wanted to do is— when I was doing research the only place that you can find pawpaw fruit is you can get some frozen for, like, twenty bucks a pound from Ohio. And I was, like, we can do that! [Laughter] We can totally do that and that can make some money. We can make money off of these specialty things that people are really intrigued and interested about, and then we can just make food and give food away to our people.

So for the pandemic specifically, I had about twelve dozen eggs or something that had come from the chickens that we had gotten, and I was trying to sell them, not having much luck because I didn't have a storefront. But they all ended up getting eaten after the hurricane because there were people sheltering in the tribal center and they were all there. And I was, like, "Please eat them. Please eat them." [Laughter]

0:23:01

So they all got eaten, they were very loved, and people were really excited about them. And I was really excited to be able to expand that.

Carly Berlin: Awesome. Tell me more about sort of the arc of your work over the last two years. Which I know— it’s funny doing these interviews because I think in a sense not enough time has passed to reflect on that. But I guess for you, tell me about moments that stick out as especially rewarding in regards to the work we’re talking about and moments that were especially challenging.

Ida Aronson: Sure. Creating Yákani’ Ékelanna’ alone as a way to get people to interact with our language— which Houma Language Project has been in the process of revitalizing our native language since 2013.

0:24:05

We’ve really had a great push since about 2018, 2019 in interacting with our people so even just getting people to say the name Yákani’ Ékelanna’ for me was just really great. And we were poised to do all sorts of signage and stuff in language to be able to get people familiar with these names and words and such and get people connected back with the language, and also back with the land at the same time. During the hurricane it was really cool to see how much our mutual aid network spread. Bvlbancha Collective did a lot of heavy lifting on that. We had our friend Jordan doing volunteer coordination with us at the farm and we were able to do food and water delivery to people, getting people what it is they needed, gas delivery, COVID safety, cleaning supplies.

0:25:06

At one point we had more roofs tarped than the national blue tarp program. We were just, like, “Cool! You guys are doing a great job. Thanks!” But we had coordinated enough mutual aid help and our own resources and supplies and such to be able to do hundreds of roofs tarped and get people some semblance of safety and cover. And in so we were able to create a lot of connections with people. We gave a lot of aid to a variety of indigenous communities down the bayou, undocumented people, all sorts of people of color, and just really anybody who was at the ends of the bayous who needed help, because they took so long just getting streets uncovered that people were in a really serious amount of need.

0:26:06

And just being able to help provide a little bit towards that was really inspiring and something that I personally needed in terms of— it feels like from a federal point we are alone, but we aren’t alone. We have each other. We have a community. And time and time again it really struck home how much it is that we have each other and that we have to rely on each other. We can’t do this alone, but at least we have each other. And it’s so powerful. It was, like, yeah, we’re all awesome! Heck, yeah. [Laughter]

Carly Berlin: Yeah. I want to hear a little bit more about the Bvlbancha Collective. You talked a little bit at the beginning about what it is, exactly. And I’m also just curious to hear what set you up to be doing that work in the aftermath of Hurricane Ida.

0:27:01

Ida Aronson: Sure. Bvlbancha Collective is an indigenous mutual aid collective that originally started to give herbal medicine to people. We give away seventy-five percent about of what we

make, and then we just kind of sell twenty-five percent either online or at various farmers' markets to basically just recoup the cost of materials. And since then we have kind of— lots of people think that everybody indigenous is part of Bvlbancha Collective. We're just a very close community. The actual collective itself is five femme and two spirit people who are the decision makers. And we coordinate with a variety of other groups and friends and we all just kind of work together. Not everybody in Bvlbancha is Bvlbancha Collective, I will say that. [Laughter]

0:28:00

But it's flattering that y'all think of us that way. And so we were giving out and giving away herbalism and COVID safety advice and cleaning supplies or aid or whatever it is that we can give. And also connecting with indigenous people to get people connected into community, to ceremony, to revitalization efforts, to ways that they want to be involved because there is very much a kind of general indigenous revitalization happening in the city. And I guess we're just part of that, which is really cool and honoring and all that. We create partnerships with different communities, and we try to help out the best that we can. We did a donation drive to the Bogue Homa community, for instance, which is the furthest south village of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw.

0:29:01

We specifically didn't do a full Mississippi Band outreach because they're a huge tribe. We have connection with this small village, and we were able to do the most help for these hundred or so families that was within our range of ability. And so we heard a need from their community, and we rose to meet that need. And so that's kind of what we're trying to do is move within our

ability, to the best of our ability, for the greatest good and just help our people, and really help anybody who needs it. We're not gonna say, "No, you can't have some because you're not indigenous." That's not what's happening in any way, shape, or form. We just want to be specific in our uplifting to make sure that these people who, time and time again, get left alone to fend for ourselves are getting things that we need from our own community. And if other people get help, then, hey, that's awesome.

0:29:58

Carly Berlin: And I'm familiar with the word Bvlbancha living in New Orleans, but I'm wondering if you can talk about the meaning of that name?

Ida Aronson: Absolutely. Bvlbancha is a Choctaw word. It means "the place of many tongues" or "the place of many languages." Bvlbancha has always been a trading port. It has always been on the Mississippi. It's always been this kind of very favorable and tactful land to be on, but did you know that New Orleans floods? We didn't live there all the time. It has always flooded.

[Laughter] And so we would move in and out with the seasons and we would come into town for trading and for dancing and for ceremony and then move back out to our respective areas of either hunting or whatever we were doing for that time period. And so Bvlbancha continues to be the place of many languages, the place of many tongues, and we continue to uphold that.

Carly Berlin: And tell me about your work around Hurricane Ida, wherever feels like a good place to pick that up.

0:31:01

Ida Aronson: Sure. Myself personally, because I live in this area, I didn't go as hard as I had been going because I was already kind of getting towards that burnt-out area and then the hurricane hit. And we stayed so we stayed in the whole area and have been helping our community since then. But I was helping with a lot of volunteer coordination. I was helping making spreadsheets so that way people knew where to go, had the addresses, had the things that they need to bring to that person and just try to help streamline it. Because we definitely picked up tips and tricks about streamlining and best practices, I guess, to get things done as we were going, because it was definitely like everything terrible was happening and also, we also had to help other people.

0:31:59

Helping ourselves be the best for ourselves and also for other people was an interesting scale. [Laughter] But coordinating with— Imagine Water Works did an amazing amount of outreach and help and resource-getting for us, and I'm so thankful for them. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, MADR, they were also wonderful. We have continuing relationships with these organizations. What else is happening? I was also creating art at that same time. It was my personally first major hurricane that I went through. I remember Katrina and Rita and then coming down after because I was living up north at the time. And so helping after and seeing the destruction after is a heck of a lot different than living through it. And now there's a huge hole in my floor, my roof still isn't fixed, and we are already into next year's hurricane season. So that's a fun new stress to deal with. [Laughter]

0:33:00

And so what else did I do during the hurricane? I was really heavy on support roles trying to get information. I did a lot of coordinating between official information that the tribe was getting and trying to filter that down to our people so that way it could get out to where it needed to go. So that way we were asking for the materials and resources that it was that we needed and asking the correct people and organizations to try to get that down here. Coordinating where to put stuff and just making sure that everything was in order and able to just go out. And resting. [Laughter] Just trying to get through it in a sustainable way because I can absolutely see how people can very, very easily fall into destructive habits when you're, like, "Well, everything sucks so at least maybe it won't suck for the next five minutes."

0:34:01

I get it. [Laughter] I totally get it, and that's real. I also started— I don't know if you saw when you came in— there's some shelves on my front porch. I created a neighborhood hub here. Right after the hurricane for the longest time I had a tent set up. I had power set up for people. There was always a cooler full of cold drinks. There was always anything that I could stock the shelves with, baby supplies, cleaning supplies, food. I would make food boxes and just every couple of days I would just restock the shelves, try to find more shelves, and just create this community hub. And so, even now we're really just down to the one shelving unit, but anything I put out there the whole neighborhood knows that they can always come here. I have people that come knock on my door asking for either, like, "I have a cough; do you have any more of that fire cider?" I've got a couple of families down there that really love the fire cider which is, like, apple cider vinegar with all sorts of different herbs and citrus and onions and garlic.

0:34:58

And it really helps open you up if you've got a stuffy nose or anything like that and help boost your immune system. And so it feels really good to just know that the neighborhood understands that this is a safe space. They can come here. I might now always have everything, and I'll have people come here asking for money sometimes. It's, like, "I'm sorry. I literally don't have money. [Laughter] But if there's something else I can offer you, please let me know and I'll try to get that for you." And that feels good, just knowing that the kids in the neighborhood know that if something is wrong, they can come here and ask for help and that I will never judge them, that this is a safe space, that— I don't know, I'm not going to snitch or something. I just want to make sure that everybody's safe. And that's something that needs to continue in all neighborhoods outside of disaster. When you have these networks set up in place then when disaster hits you've already got a base that you can operate off of.

0:35:58

And people also know one of my neighbors is a firefighter. They came over a couple of times and brought some— they had hot food set up and there was left over, and they were, like, well, we can just bring it to the neighborhood, and it'll get out kind of thing. And so that feels really good.

Carly Berlin: Yeah. Part of what sort of drew me to doing this project in the first place was just noticing the sort of capacity building and infrastructure building around mutual aid specifically early in the pandemic, and when Hurricane Ida hit watching those networks mobilize and have a

system in place, and it sounds like you're talking about some similar things. And so I'm curious what that might bring up for you or any thoughts around that?

Ida Aronson: Yeah. Right after the hurricane we were literally stuck in town for about two or three days. The power lines were down everywhere. All we had was each other. And so when all you have is each other and you're already at a lower level of being stable— because everyone here is pretty much poor.

0:37:01

This street over here is kind of the dividing street in this neighborhood between the rich people and everybody else. [Laughter] And I never saw anything from them. All those rich people never helped anybody. I never saw anything, any offers of help, any offers of free stuff, any offers of, “Hey, come here and you can get what you need.” My house was that place, and I had people from other neighborhoods coming here. And so if I can at least even just be, like, “Oh, wow, that was a really good idea. Maybe we should have more of that,” that would be really cool to see other hubs come up. And I take a lot from watching Bvlbancha, too, of just, like, “Oh, wow, that community fridge is a really cool idea.” That's something I would love to have long term is a series of community fridges down here. But it's a different culture and it's a little harder in some ways— in many ways.

0:38:00

And so I'm just kind of navigating that disconnect of, like, there's Bvlbancha culture and then there's bayou culture, and how can I help bring some of this mutual aid thinking and action into this area that traditionally it feels like just charity and churches is— disaster strikes and they're

waiting for charity and churches. And we need to be doing our own thing. In so many ways that is true. I think about the Cajun Navy and how much good they do getting out to people and connecting with people. Actually, during the early part of the hurricane we literally saved somebody's life. Our friend in Alabama had a friend in New Orleans and it was their family member, and she was, like, "I haven't heard from him in ages." We ended up getting in touch with him and he was literally trapped under a beam.

0:39:02

And so we got the resources over to him. We called the fire department. We called the police. We kept up with that and made sure that he was taken care of, and he was able to get out and, like, we literally saved somebody's life! That's all from just networking. It was, like, "Oh, cool! All right. Well, that's a big deal."

Carly Berlin: Yeah. Going back to the, like, people expect churches and charity thing, I think that has been a huge theme that's come up through these interviews and I've just noticed the ways people have talked about mutual aid being able to be more nimble and faster in a lot of ways in actually assessing people's individual needs rather than getting a shipment of water and people already have water. And so I'm wondering if you can talk about why mutual aid— why is it so important, I guess?

Ida Aronson: Yeah, sure. Mutual aid for me means building power and that means building power in the communities.

0:40:02

So building that person's power, like, "Hey, I see that you have a need. You have your own voice, you are your own best advocate, you know exactly what it is you need." For me, the greatest respect I can give that person is to honor that you live your truth and you're telling me what it is you need, so why don't I just get you what you need instead of, "Here's some stuff that I have." Which certainly, when you're getting these big shipments of stuff, you're, like, "Yep, I do need that and I would use that, but also, I need this thing." And it might be a cultural thing. It might be just, like, a South Louisiana thing that's our norm of just, like, "Well, I'm not gonna eat that . . ." [Laughter] We would get healthy food in and the amount of times that down the bayou people would be, like, "I'm not gonna eat that." [Laughter] It's, like, "Okay, cool. I guess we'll take all the vegetarian stuff 'cause I've been a vegetarian for a long time. Like, yeah, I'll eat it." Everyone else is, like, "Unh-uh." [Laughter] Like, all right, that's legit. And that's a reality. They're not gonna eat it. They're not gonna eat it.

0:41:01

And also people feeling empowered of, like, "Oh, wow, that was really nice. Now I have this thing, I'm gonna bring it out, and I'm gonna give it to my neighbor and pay it forward." And just empowering people to be their own help and to be their neighbor's help. And that— how do I put it, I guess— for me charity and church also comes with this power system of, there is a power system giving you something that you want. "Here, let me give this to you," and kind of this, like, "Well, you might have to give me something later. You might have to give me your information. You might have to be part of the church, whatever." There is no expectation for mutual aid other than you're part of that community. Even then, if you want to go screw off and sit at home, fine.

0:42:00

That's what you need to do and that's fine. But maybe I'll come check in every so often and be, like, "Hey, you still okay? Do you need anything else?" It's the difference between building community and giving people their own empowerment versus coming in and swooping in and being the savior. And I'm not here to be a savior. I live here, too, and my family lives here, too, and I'm scared and worried for my family and my friends, and how are we gonna survive this together? Because we have been put in this situation that is not our fault and we still have to survive. I'm not going to let the government get the better of me. [Laughter] Because indigenous reality down here, after the hurricane, too, we were getting stories of basically people that actually live at the end of the bayous have less power than the people with wealth who camp there. And so we were getting stories of, "Well, I'm not gonna reconnect your power, I'm not gonna reconnect your water because you're not supposed to be living here. You're not supposed to be living here full time because the water is rising, and the storms are getting worse."

0:43:01

But it's, like, cool, this is our traditional land, and you are taking that away from me because you don't want to support me living here anymore even though you people are the ones that pushed us to the ends of the bayous in the first place. And just I very much feel and see this ongoing genocide and paper genocide and straight up genocide of our indigenous peoples and just the massive environmental racism. So these disasters help serve to shove people out of this area, and the more time that they take—and we were seeing this directly—the more time that they take to give aid and create circumstances where people can still live in this area, that's not what they

want. They want to take that land. So the more trouble that they can put in the way towards returning to the land and making it livable, the less people that come back.

0:43:59

And we are absolutely seeing this, and it's something that— the Houma Language Project, for instance, the Houma Language Project is entirely digital because our people are in a state of diaspora because our entire team stretches from California, Texas, Louisiana over to the East Coast. We have people in diaspora and that is a part of genocide, is shifting the people around so that there's not a culture that's right there. Like, what is your culture? Well, everybody is spread out so how do you have a culture? All of these expounding, compounding issues that you're just, like, "Why am I even thinking about this right now? I just need some food and water." But the government is trying to get rid of us. [Laughter] That's crappy. It feels bad. And mutual aid for me was a way to keep our people living where they want to be in the ways that they want to be, and that is the most important for me.

0:45:03

Carly Berlin: Did you mention earlier that the garden was sort of a gathering place after the hurricane, too? Can you talk a little bit more about what that looked like?

Ida Aronson: Yeah, I can talk a little bit about that. The Yákani' Ékelanna' garden became— because it is right off of the highway and it is actually also on this power highway, so it actually got power even though it's further down the bayou, it got power before I got power here in Thibodaux because you had to get that power running down West Main to get it to the rest of the bayous and everything. Regardless, outside of that, even when we didn't have power, there's

enough land there, we had people camping there. We had supplies in the barn. We were able to sustain keeping— oh, my God. Thistle, go away. [Laughter]

Carly Berlin: [Laughter] Wait, can you tell us your cat's name?

Ida Aronson: This is Thistle. He's a bad boy. [Laughter]

Carly Berlin: He wants to get right up to the mic. [Laughter]

0:46:00

Ida Aronson: And scream in it just like he does in my face at two in the morning. Okay. He's gonna lay down. Anyway, so we had people staying at Yákani' Ékelanna'. We had a series of tents that people could stay at. There was power. There was water. There was communal food. We had volunteer coordinators there all the time, so we were able to...“Come in this night, we'll get up early in the morning, we'll send people in various areas down the bayou. You get this address, you get this address, you do these things, come back, we'll reconvene and then send people out again,” kind of thing. And so we just had this continuous cycle from right after the hurricane until late November.

0:46:57

And I think we dispersed all that in late November and I think that was the end of our major roofing, food and water delivery, and things switched to being available at the tribal center. And we had kind of started this ideation of free markets and setting up markets that people can just grab what it is they need, really trying to help push the tribe away from this charity mindset into this mutual aid, free market, let people tell you what it is they need mindset. Because the reality

is the United Houma Nation is often very conservative, and that was its own challenge, but I won't get into that.

Carly Berlin: Sure. That's fine. And tell me just so I can visualize where exactly the Yákani' Ékelanna' garden is. Is it down closer to Houma?

Ida Aronson: Yeah. It's actually pretty perfectly in between Thibodaux and Houma. It's in Gray.

Carly Berlin: Okay.

Ida Aronson: It's right off the highway. And then, about fifteen minutes further down the road is the new Houma Nation Tribal Center, which is the old Oaks of Houma, which was a elder community housing.

0:48:03

So it had a lot of support there and it also got really messed up by the hurricane, so we had people that actually had lost their housing furthest down the bayou and were sheltering in place at that tribal center for many months, and so making sure that we would every so often send some herbal medicine over there or more eggs or foods or whatever we could get over to them. That was very much a hub for the area of supplies and stuff. And then, Yákani' Ékelanna' was this volunteer hub so when people knew that they wanted to come help coordinate and help further down the bayou they'd meet up at Yákani' Ékelanna' and go out.

Carly Berlin: That makes sense. Thanks for clarifying that. What have I not asked about that feels important to include in all of this?

0:48:59

Ida Aronson: Hmm. I guess just moving into the future, I hope for continued cultural survival and moving into thriving and really owning our power and having a say over the land. We don't have indigenous sovereignty in this area. There is no obligation for the government to reach out to even state-recognized tribes. Their only actual legal obligation is to reach out to federal tribes, [redacted]. And there's just this realization that we don't want to be sacrificed— *I* don't want to be sacrificed on the alter to capitalism, extraction, pollution, and waste. This area is so vital, for not only— we aren't just a fun land for people to vacation to. I think something that really drove home after the hurricane is that Hurricane Ida messed up from Louisiana to New York.

0:50:04

New York got flooded. And so I hope that the rest of the nation can at least begin to see that this region being safe and the fact that we've lost our barrier islands, the fact that we're losing all this land and protection affects them, too. Those barrier islands and our lands weaken the hurricane so that it doesn't make it all the way up to the northeast or to these other areas. And when these things are gone, when these protections are gone, y'all aren't protected either. And I really feel like from living a long time in Massachusetts there's this huge disconnect of where your energy comes from. And when I was doing work up there towards the end, I was really trying to get people to understand that these gas pipelines, these natural gas pipelines come from Louisiana. You all are killing my people so that way y'all can stay warm during the winter.

0:51:02

And you deserve to survive, too, but please understand where this is coming from and that there are better ways and more sustainable ways of doing this work and that all of these issues are so intersecting. Food sovereignty, land sovereignty, the oil and gas extraction industry, and people's safety in terms of these storms getting worse and worse, they cannot be separated. And they keep trying so hard to separate these issues. And I was, like, "They're not; they're one issue." [Sound of saw] Sorry about the saw. [Laughter] And that also our people aren't just taking this and rolling over and giving up. There are so many efforts where people are trying to rebuild the coast through these variety of efforts, be it from oyster shells, be it from planting grasses.

0:52:00

We are trying to work around this system that is just extracting and killing much faster than we can keep up with it, but that there is so much work and passion in the efforts that are going on that don't even get really any coverage except for people down here. And meanwhile, we keep getting passed off as this backwoods hick place that has no hope for anything. And it's, like, yeah, and despite all that, despite working against these queer and trans regulations that keep coming out, that every single identity attack that comes out, I'm still here doing this indigenous work and fighting for everybody who lives here despite all of these continued attacks trying to take away attention. It's exhausting. It's exhausting and really hard and disheartening, and sometimes I feel like it's just 'cause I'm a big, mean Aries. I'm just, like, "No! I'm just gonna fight you!" [Laughter]

0:53:01

And I'm punching at the same time. It's bad. I don't know. But we're here, we're doing this work, and we just need some more support and not a power support or a patronizing type of help. We know what we're doing. We just need that support in a mutual aid kind of way.

Carly Berlin: I'm just looking at my questions to see if I've missed anything. Just, again, on that note of looking into the future, I guess maybe on a little bit of a nearer term, we're entering a new hurricane season. What does that mean for you and for this network that you've been talking about?

Ida Aronson: We've been trying to reconnect.

0:54:00

We've had a few meetings in terms of a community of mutual aid organization meetings to try to be connected before the hurricane whereas we were doing connections during this hurricane outreach. Now it's like, we're already connected, we're already still here. So that feels good in terms of having this network that's already ready. Everyone's already ready. Everyone is still also in hurricane start season, so it's, like, cool, we're ready. We're planning. And it's just kind of re-envisioning what resources we already have because I know for a fact that space is an issue. Okay, we have these way to get resources but where are we going to store the resources? We were given spaces last year or some organizations were given spaces. Those spaces don't necessarily— aren't still in play or might have shifted or whatever. That might be emergency based, and how are we building power to be ready to go out that's not emergency based and it's just, like, this is a recurring fund or whatever that we have.

0:55:02

So that's kind of been a thing that we're dealing with. But I think otherwise just kind of strengthening our communication and networking and relationship building towards each other as people and making sure that we're all taken care of as people. People are still doing all sorts of heart work and care work surrounding PTSD issues or just life issues of, like, "Hey, I still don't have this thing in my life. I still don't have a car, or I still don't have whatever." Trying to make sure people are all taken care of in that way. Sometimes it does feel like we're just kind of shifting from disaster to disaster because there has been so many just one after another.

0:56:01

I think about the tornadoes that happened earlier this spring. That was my first time ever even hearing about anything like that of, like, major tornado after major tornado and just being terrified for my friends. One of them hit two blocks away from my friend. They didn't even know. I was, like, "Oh, my God, are you okay?" And he was, like, "What are you talking about?" [Laughter] Oh, I see that a tornado hit two blocks from us." I was, like, "Oh, my God! That's terrifying." So I mean just shifting from disaster to disaster has been its own adventure.

[Laughter] And I don't necessarily have answers either. A lot of it is just, like, okay, well, this is what we can plan for. This is what we have. I still have to do my gig this week kind of thing. I still need to make money. I still need to do this, that, and the other. We just do our best, I guess.

0:56:59

I'm sure I also have a little bit of a different perspective from Bvlbancha people because I do very much kind of hide in the swamp a lot and do my work down here in the bayous. I only go up into the city maybe once a month, maybe once every two months sometimes. So I rely on my

Bvlbancha friends to do that networking so that way when it does come time for whatever it is we need that process is there. And that happened a bunch of times during this last hurricane, too, where I was, like, “Oh, cool! Great, thanks.” [Laughter] I didn’t have to do that thing. It was already taken care of. There was already this base, this net for me to fall into, and that was the best feeling of, like— if I didn’t have this net, I’d have fallen on cement, kind of thing. And it was just amazing realizing that this net was there regardless. And I just want for everybody to have that. We all deserve to have safety and peace of mind regardless of whatever is happening.

0:58:01

And that’s, I guess, weird to think about, but it is possible.

Carly Berlin: Anything else that you want to include as we wrap up?

Ida Aronson: I don’t think so. Nothing I can think of. I think the other thing that is really unique for me is I don’t have any kids, I only have animals and my partner, so I didn’t have to worry about their safety. I might not have stayed if I had had kids kind of thing, so I’m able to take greater risks because of that, I feel like. And that can be a change, that can be a game changer, I guess. Not that I’m advocating for anything like that, it’s just that’s my reality is that I didn’t have to worry about a small person’s life.

0:59:02

All I had to worry about was my animals, which they’re pretty good at it. [Laughter] We’ve gone through a lot together. And then myself and my husband. And so we were able to really put in these long hours, do this really hard work without having to rely on somebody that relied on me, and how different that might’ve looked if that wasn’t the case. And there’s also a reality of, like,

I don't necessarily feel safe having kids because of that, because I don't feel like there's a secure place for them, because I don't have as much of a support network as some other people, because I'm just so involved in this fight right now. And there's a reality of having to be scared for somebody's life when you're doing environmental activism to this degree. There's all sorts of stories about activists having harm come to them, being killed, being disappeared. And it's not just outside of this country.

1:00:04

So there is kind of this deeper, darker side to this that is a possibility that's really scary. Oil and gas is very monetarily invested in keeping their industry going forward, and I disagree with that.

[Laughter]

Carly Berlin: The last thing I'm going to do is just get the background noise of the space. That'll help kind of cut together the interview later. So we will just sit here quietly for, like, thirty seconds to a minute and then we'll wrap up.

[Pause]

1:00:59

Ida Aronson: And I can actually speak to that real quick. That's the neighbor doing some of their housing still from the hurricane. Their entire carport collapsed. I don't think it destroyed the car. It certainly did a lot of damage to the car. They had a trailer out there. I think it probably destroyed one of the back bedrooms 'cause there was a trailer there forever. One of my other neighbors, I haven't even seen them since they got their roof back on. It just really feels like the

whole neighborhood is kind of changing in that kind of way and just people are still very much rebuilding.

1:02:03

Carly Berlin: I think I'm going to start over without the . . .

Ida Aronson: Yeah.

[End]