Chenier “Klie” Kliebert

New Orleans, LA

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Location: Imagine Water Works office

Interviewer: Carly Berlin

Transcription: Sharp Copy Transcription

Length: 56 minutes

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

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Carly Berlin: So to start off, I’m just gonna slate the tape and say who we are, where we are. So I’m Carly Berlin. The date today is May 16th, 2022. We are at the Imagine Water Works office in New Orleans on Camp Street, and I am going to be interviewing Klie Kliebert. Am I pronouncing that right?

Klie Kliebert: It’s Klie Kliebert.

Carly Berlin: Kliebert. Okay. Awesome. So to start, would you mind just introducing yourself for the recorder, tell us who you are, what you do, and also your pronouns.

Klie Kliebert: So my full name is Chenier Kliebert and I go by Klie. My pronouns are they, them. I’m the executive director with Imagine Water Works. We do water, climate, and disaster readiness and response work.

Carly Berlin: Awesome. And would you mind just sharing your birthdate for the record?

Klie Kliebert: It’s April 26, 1985.

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Carly Berlin: [Dog barking] And I'm just going to note that we have a little bit of dog noise in the next room. [Laughter] Would you mind telling us your dog’s name?

Klie Kliebert: Yeah. My dog is Rôder, which is actually Cajun French for “run in the streets.”

Carly Berlin: [Laughter]

Klie Kliebert: And so this is very on par for that.

Carly Berlin: Next, would you just mind saying where you were born and how you got to New Orleans?

Klie Kliebert: Yes. I’m from New Orleans. I’m a Louisiana Creole, Cajun, and Indigenous. In actual New Orleans, well, on record, I’m a twelfth generation New Orleanian. And then who knows beyond that. So just been here. [Laughter]

Carly Berlin: Awesome. Take me back to your childhood home. Could you describe it to me a little bit?

Klie Kliebert: Yeah.

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So we’re in it right now. [Laughter] Not literally in this house. That would be interesting.

Carly Berlin: [Laughter]

Klie Kliebert: So anyone who’s spent time in New Orleans or lived in New Orleans knows it’s a complex place. It’s simultaneously the easiest and hardest place to live. It’s a place of joy and a lot of celebration and a lot of hardship and just deep history, and a lot of Creole Indigenous history that is still around us right now.

Carly Berlin: And because this is for a foodways-focused organization, what was your relationship with food growing up?

Klie Kliebert: Yeah. Well, so another New Orleans thing that people say is we live to eat instead of eat to live.

Carly Berlin: [Laughter]

Klie Kliebert: And so it is very central to our ways of being.

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I grew up going to St. Joseph’ s Day altars where you bring food for the altar but then you also eat as a community. [Phone sound] Sorry about that. My family has done the red bean Mondays. It’s something that my friend group is starting to do, which is really exciting, making our own family here. It’s sort of throughout, it’s part of everything we do. So when we get into our work here, obviously food must be a part of that, as well.

Carly Berlin: Yeah. This is pivoting a little bit to kind of the focus of this project on mutual aid and food in New Orleans during the pandemic, and with our crazy last two hurricane seasons. But like I was telling you a moment ago, most of the other folks I’ve spoken to for this project so far are or were involved with mutual aid efforts that kind of sprung out of the early days of the pandemic.

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And obviously, Imagine Water Works has been around for a lot longer than that. And so I’m wondering if you can kind of talk about in a little more detail what Imagine Water Works is, how it started, and what your role is now and how that’s kind of evolved over time?

Klie Kliebert: Yeah. So we just turned ten years old, so it’s been a chunk of time, and we’re in that period where we’’e kind of regrouping and realizing that we have been here for a while. We started off initially in more traditional water management spaces. At that time in the city there wasn’t quite yet this boom of nonprofits and small businesses who focus on water now. We have that everywhere now, which is amazing. But that didn’t actually exist. It was more individuals talking about water at that point.

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So our early work was, yeah, gathering people, being like, “Hey, we need to talk about this.” [Laughter] We started the New Orleans Water Collaborative, which is still going strong. We started Water Wise NOLA which does the rain barrels and stuff. We put out how-to guides on how to make a rain barrel, so kind of got that stuff off the ground. And then people took it and went running with it. We were, like, great! We’re gonna move on and start doing additional work at this point. In the meantime, we were doing some hazard mitigation work for the City of New Orleans, but also for various counties outside of Louisiana. We were doing disaster prep work but mostly for small businesses, so we were writing guides on how to prepare your staff and how to prepare your business for a storm. My background before this, I was working in the for-profit world with phones that you could take anywhere with you.

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This is dating me, but . . .

Carly Berlin: [Laughter]

Klie Kliebert: Around New Orleans, business and restaurants, had business phones that you could take when there’s a storm and still have your business line. And then, I also worked in generators, so I brought that to Water Works, as well. So we did that stuff for a while. We’ve always been engaged in research and just sort of interested in longer term change. And as more and more folks got involved in the water sector, we shifted to more explicitly talk about climate. And then dug deeper into our disaster readiness and response bucket. And then, as needs have arisen, we’ve shifted more and more.

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And as gaps are filled and we see that we’re no longer needed in a specific place— you know, we aren’t committed to reinventing a wheel over and over. We’re also open to ending things when they need to end and shifting when we need to shift, and that’s been part of how we’ve been around this long. So at this point, especially through COVID and hurricanes and everthing the last few years, it’s been very disaster heavy.

Carly Berlin: Yeah. That makes sense, unfortunately. In that vein, I’m curious, kind of take me back to what March 2020 looked like for y’all. Where were you at before, I guess? What was that sort of context and what was the decision-making happening then about the sort of role that you wanted to play?

Klie Kliebert: Yeah. So we kind of prepared for COVID without knowing we were preparing for COVID. [Laughter]

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At the beginning of 2019, I officially became executive director of Water Works, and then we also went through an entire name change. We added Imagine onto the front, became Imagine Water Works. And we also joined a group of Southern organizers who were launching mutual aid centers. And so this was early 2019. We met with folks in Atlanta who were part of the Southern Movement Assembly. And then, we had essentially groups of people from— I'm trying to remember— I think it’s seven Southern states who, we were all, like, “Okay, let’s get this going in each state ‘cause we don’t know what the future holds. We know that we’re all impacted by storms across the Gulf Coast, actually.” And so we were working on that and outlining it and getting our values more explicit.

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We were learning from each other, and all that was set up in 2019. Of course, it, like, built on the work and the relationships that we already had as Water Works 1.0. [Laughter] So then when March 2020 hit, we were oddly ready, or maybe not oddly. I’m not sure.

Carly Berlin: [Laughter]

Klie Kliebert: We had obviously no idea that COVID was coming but we had already talked about different types of infrastructure that we need to have for a storm. We sort of translated that over to responding to COVID. We launched a Facebook group immediately that has since grown to— I don’t know the exact number but we we’re maybe around nine thousand or something people.

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And just sort of threw every skill that we’d picked up into this effort. And yeah, I could go on and on about what happened in March 2020. [Laughter] Do you want me to keep . . .

Carly Berlin: Sure.

Klie Kliebert: Sure. Yeah. So we launched a Facebook group then started fielding requests and needs. One that came up pretty early was hair clippers. So then we launched a project called the Trans Clippers Project, which we had no idea would actually turn into this whole big thing. But the way it started was just in our mutual aid group somebody asked for a haircut. And then, as a trans person, I recognized that this was a trans person who probably needed it for affirmative reasons, gender affirmation. And so I was, like, “Okay, this is very important.” I think about hair a lot too, as an indigenous person.

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There’s just so many reasons why hair is important to people. So we were, like, “We’re gonna make sure this one request is met.” And then more people needed hair clippers, and then it just sort of expanded from there. It ended up being in eighteen states and three countries. And so, in that way, we started developing a model for how to respond very quickly and with a lot of autonomy. The reason that worked, I think, is because each state had a local organizer and they got to make the decisions and we just provided the resources that we had or the knowledge we had. We provided the internet infrastructure and the donation platforms and coordinated all the stuff that we could from our computers like nerds so that they could go out into the world.

[Laughter] And we’ve continued to do that in various less formal ways throughout our mutual aid work.

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So there was a lot of that. We worked to move a lot of resources to Indigenous communities, specifically. They’re actually often left out of resources from the state. And so we were sometimes very clearly and sometimes sneakily gathering resources and sending them to coastal tribal nations, both in Louisiana and Mississippi, and that included, like, medicine and face masks and hand sanitizer. I’m trying to even think back because we’ve also been through so many different cycles of storms at this point, and COVID, actually, but that’s what comes to mind right now.

Carly Berlin: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

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Part of what I’m kind of interested in exploring with this project is, with some of the other folks I’ve talked to, they sort of built an infrastructure early in the pandemic that then translated to when storms happen. But y’all are kind of the flip of that and also just the feedback loop of learning things from a disaster and then being able to use those tools later, or even before, like you were saying, kind of as part of the Movement Assembly and longer-term organizing project.

Klie Kliebert: Yeah. It actually all interconnects, too. You mentioned you spoke with Spirit from Southern Solidarity. They actually formed within our mutual aid group, so our mutual aid

members in our group were— it started off by folks going around picking food off of trees in the group. [Laughter]

Carly Berlin: I remember this happening and I didn’t realize that connection, but I totally saw that in the Facebook group at that time, yeah.

Klie Kliebert: Yeah. So then they kept doing it, and they were like, let’s add sandwiches. And then they were, like, let’s get in a truck and pass it out to people.

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And in the meantime, their organizer was talking with us, and we were sort of offering support and some advice on how to keep it going. And they’ve since branched off and done a bunch of stuff. And so, in that way, yeah, the cycle actually continues. And that’s what we hope happens is that people are able to find each other and share what we have. And then several strategies are hopefully born from that, too, because we also need many people doing many things at this point. Yeah, it’ s all connected.

Carly Berlin: Yeah. I’m curious also if you can talk about— the Facebook group is huge and has grown a ton, and I’m curious what goes into maintaining it and moderating it?

Klie Kliebert: Yeah. That is complex all on its own. [Laughter]

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This is where, again, I personally have been sort of preparing for this since the internet started. I’ve been a moderator of things since forums were first becoming a thing. I’ve moderated in a lot

of queer and trans groups, which are very difficult spaces to moderate. And I’m also an admin of a large nonprofit group, as well, and so I took some of that experience into the Facebook group. And so a lot of my early time with the group was actually training up the other moderators on what to do when these things happen, and how to maintain our values in an online space. Because culture is really central to our work, and we’re used to working in person. Internet culture is not New Orleans culture. [Laughter]

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It’s so different. And so one of the biggest hurdles, but something that we are very intentional about, is trying our best to maintain that same culture online. It’s not possible to get the exact same culture, but a lot of what goes into it is sort of brainstorming things that come up, how we support people. And we’re trying to shift internet culture and maintain New Orleans culture at the same time. There’s a lot of shaming that goes on in the internet world. There’s also a lot of shaming that goes on in disaster relief. And so we spend— and especially in the beginning of the group, we spent a lot of time sort of trying to spread the word of, like, “Shaming is not how we’re gonna do this, whether we’re in person or online.” That is actually a hard line for us and anyone who begins to shame someone, they get a warning and then if they continue, then we’re, like, “You’re not ready for this shame-free world that we’re trying to create.”

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So that’s where a lot of emotional energy, honestly, goes. And we have a few people who approve posts every day. Obviously, there’s the everyday workings. [Dog barking] Sorry about

my dog. [Laughter] We are constantly talking about some of our guidelines in the group. [Dog barking] Hold on. [Laughter] Rôder! Thank you.

Carly Berlin: [Laughter]

Klie Kliebert: Some real-life interview there. Yeah. So we’re talking about the guidelines, we’re talking about what they mean.

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There is no perfect set of guidelines either, so there’s a lot of stuff that goes on behind the scenes where we’re just, like, “How do we get this as close as possible to what we want to see?” It’s a lot of work, and it’s 24/7. We shut down the group sometimes to take breaks, but it’s, like, once every few months. [Laughter] So we’re still sort of brainstorming how to keep it going but also keep our moderator team going. And we’ll see, we’ll see what happens this year.

Carly Berlin: Yeah. I want to jump ahead a little bit, but I think you and I first spoke right after Hurricane Laura when y’all were really mobilizing around the evacuees who were in hotels in New Orleans. And I’m really just curious to kind of dive into what that work looked like and how you mobilized so quickly and were really assessing needs on the ground for the thousands of people who were in New Orleans from the Lake Charles area?

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This was in, just for the record, late August, early September of 2020, though a lot of people were here for months and months after that.

Klie Kliebert: Yeah. So this was another thing where we prepared for it without knowing we were preparing for it. And it had been kind of like the perfect amount of time in our group to where we had established a group culture, and everybody knew how to use it and it was really flowing. So then, when we had the influx of people who evacuated to here, the group was, like, “Okay, we know how to do this. We’ve been doing it for each other.” And so we were just really ready. Also, it’s New Orleanians who— we know what it feels like to be displaced. And so folks were actually in non-congregate shelters, so they were in individual hotels.

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It was thirty, thirty-two or so— somewhere around there— hotels across the city, which made it harder to find people and connect with them. Normally, you would have a shelter and they would have a bunch of resources at the shelter. They didn’t have anything at most of the hotels, and they also wouldn’t let people in or out unless you were an evacuated person. And so we went to the hotels and we flyered to invite people into the group. And weirdly, the internet was how we were still connecting since we couldn’t go inside. We asked them to spread the word to other people. We physically took people’s phones and put them into the group if they weren’t quite sure how to do it yet, or we would help people make posts.

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And I think we only did that for one or two days. When the resource is useful and the thing works, the word will spread. So within the first week we had five thousand interactions in the Facebook group, and I’m defining that as comments and posts, not likes and stuff. Particular to

this project there was a lot of food stuff that happened. When folks went into the hotels, they either didn’t have ways to prepare food, or those ways had been actually taken out. The fridge or the microwave had been removed. Not in all cases. But again, it was really hard to figure out who had what where.

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So the group was able to bring hot plates and microwaves and crockpots, very Southern— to folks in the hotels so that they could prepare their own meals. There was a lot of moving food in between places because there would be a big drop of food at one place but then you have thirty other hotels that got none or their food was cold or bad even. There was a lot of responding to specific food needs. Some things were just sweet. One person needed a birthday cake for their son, and someone in the group was, like, “Yes, I've been waiting to use my cake-baking skills!”

Carly Berlin: [Laughter]

Klie Kliebert: And so their kid got a birthday cake, which you don’t think about as a disaster need, but that could make all the difference for someone. So folks in the group were really able to respond directly to people and to meet needs that aren’t necessarily always met.

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Carly Berlin: Yeah, that makes sense. One of the themes that’s kind of emerged in these interviews so far is folks have talked about, there’s a ton of food at the wrong place and you just need to figure out where it needs to go fast enough so that people can eat it before it spoils. And

so it’s interesting to hear you talk about that kind of arising after Laura, too, and I'm wondering if you can talk more about it?

Klie Kliebert: Yeah. I mean, it’s both, like, “Oh, wow, I can’t believe that’s a thing,” and also, like, “Oh, that’s just a recreation of all the systems that we have.” There are surpluses and there’s nothing. And so part of the call of mutual aid is to figure out how to take a surplus and divide it amongst people and make sure all the needs are met. And so it’s both a shocking thing and a very expected and normal thing.

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But part of what we end up doing, because we do have connections and we’ve been here a long time, we also end up filling in the role where it’s like, we’re trying to get all the insider information. So we’re talking to the city and we’re talking to FEMA and we’re talking to people who are used to catering food distributions during storms here. Those are small business owners who are not actually nonprofit people, but they have a lot of knowledge. And so I mean, like, texting those folks and then we’ re sharing that information out. Usually, we end up sharing that with other groups who are actually doing the legwork of, like, “Oh, okay, then I need to go here and do this, and so the next week they’re gonnabe doing this.” We found our role evolving into more of an information pathway where we’re just, like, “Okay, we’re in this door, so here’s what we got.” That’s also complicated and difficult ‘cause we’re constantly trying to maintain all the relationships necessary to do that.

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That’s not very showy work. It’s not exciting to a lot of people. [Laughter] But you have to have people who are finding information that’s reliable and sending it out. So that’s where we end up being.

Carly Berlin: I’m curious, just a couple of months after Laura we had Hurricane Zeta here, end of October if I’m remembering right, and I’m curious to hear kind of how your work shifted when we had a hurricane hit New Orleans.

Klie Kliebert: Yeah. At that point, we were just like, “Yeah, of course, this is fine.” [Laughter] But with Zeta we launched the Community Power Map which was encouraging neighbors who had power to put up charging stations in front of their homes. I will always remember those during Halloween, actually, because a lot of them were spooky and funny and fun.

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Carly Berlin: [Laughter]

Klie Kliebert: So it was, like, come charge next to this skeleton. It just felt very New Orleans. [Laughter] So we have a lot of pictures of the launch of the Community Power Map, and it’s just all these very creative displays. So that was the best thing to come out of Zeta, actually, ‘cause folks were really into it. It was a fun thing to do. It was really nice that it was during a time when homes were already decorated and already getting extra inviting for people. Many places combined COVID resources at their charging stations, so it ended up being not just a phone charge and Wi-Fi, but there was also food and snacks and hand sanitizer and masks. So that took off at that point.

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But the really cool thing is that at this point we’ve seen people replicating it. And so, since then when we’ve had subsequent storms, we’ve had folks join the map, of course, again, but there’s also so many people just doing it. They saw it being done and they’re, like, “Oh, yeah, I can do this.” And so there’s been enough time where we’ve seen some of, like, the culture shift that we’re hoping to make. Where it's, like, “Do you live in New Orleans? Be prepared to host a charging station if you have power.” It’s just like part of living here. You kind of expect it. It’s like sharing your food when you go outside. Now people share their power. The Power Map has been viewed half a million times at this point. Which is wild to us. We have since also been able to convince the city to do some of their own power stations.

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During Zeta we talked to the city and asked them actually to include fire stations as charging places, and as a place to get oxygen, and they were, like, “That’s a great idea. We’ll do that.” So they’ve kept doing that. We had also, like, spoken to libraries and to the NORD centers. And you’ll see this season— and this past season— the city has gone deeper into making that an actual ongoing, accepted practice. So again, starting from one person having the idea to do a charging station, and then multiple people doing it, small businesses, now the city’s doing it. And so that’s, like. . . Zeta actually feels like a really important time, even though it was a relatively small storm compared to the other ones that we’ve had.

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Carly Berlin: That’s really interesting. I had heard recently that the city was kind of formalizing their power stations more and I didn’t realize that connection, so that’s really interesting. I want to fast forward I guess a year to Ida. It is funny to do an interview like this where I remember what y’all were doing and I was clued in, but can you talk about what the sort of preparation looked like ahead of Ida and sort of the immediate response and needs you were fielding and meeting?

Klie Kliebert: Yeah. I’m glad you remember it, ‘cause some of the stuff I’m just, like, wow, so much has happened. [Laughter] That’s partially because we have a large community, and the community does a lot of it. Yeah, our Ida prep looked a lot like our normal storm prep, obviously with some COVID considerations.

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We have for a few years been doing a storm prep Q&A on Instagram where people can ask us questions and then we respond publicly and anonymously so that we’re sharing that information out. That actually started because friends kept texting us and we were, like, “Okay, we’re gonna answer this publicly so that more people get the response, and you don’t have to know us to get this information.” That’s also how we started our *Queer/Trans Guide to Hurricane Season* in— I think that was 2017, just people asking us and us opening the information and making it public. So I think doing the storm Q&A a lot of people had found us for the first time through Hurricane Laura and through COVID, and I think were excited to have a resource that they could trust with the Q&A.

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It was the first time in our ten-year history that we’ve told people to evacuate, actually, which was notable and a very hard decision as a team. That is our last resort down here. There are actual studies about trauma and how actually folks who stay on their land and at their home, once they make it through, are less traumatized than the people who are displaced. So we think about that a lot. So we’re making the decisions and we’re doing the Q&A. That was being shared and seen by thousands of people. And so when the storm hit, we already had this working relationship kind of, at least through that one platform, in addition to the other ones.

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First, we were directly hit so it took us a couple days to even find service. And after that we set up a distribution center at a school, at Encore Academy. That ran for two weeks, I want to say, and we gave out about a hundred-thousand dollars in supplies. We had live music and food, real food, good food. We had healing services like Reiki and acupuncture and massage therapy, so it was just kind of— we were trying to meet a variety of needs. Obviously, we had the charging stations. We had internet and laptops ‘cause a lot of people didn’t have internet yet. So that was sort of our very immediate response.

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But we also got a lot of donations, partially because people had seen us over the past few years. And since the storm hit, we’ve given out almost three-hundred-thousand dollars directly to individuals or through groups who were giving directly to individuals. And a hundred-thousand

of that was for public health workers impacted by Ida, but the rest of it is almost, if not entirely, BIPOC and LGBTQ folks just across coastal Louisiana. And then, of course, there were many supply runs. We did a lot of— one thing that worked really well with Ida was reimbursing people for supply runs. So folks would tell us what they need and where it’s going.

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These are people who we already know so this is part of the importance of these long-term relationships. “I know you, I know your mom. We share community. We’ll be here long-term. I trust you to go buy thousands of dollars of supplies and to bring it here, give me the receipt.” And so we did a lot of supplies in that way without our physical team actually going. We did also do that, but we’re three people. At that time we were four. So that was sort of a way that we responded expansively with a small team, which is kind of the goal ‘cause we want to use as much of our supplies as we can to go out into the world.

Carly Berlin: One of the things that I’m really curious about with this project is just kind of looking at how nimble mutual aid can be in those moments, ‘cause they’re also so many formal nonprofits, institutions, relief agencies, whatever, where the eligibility requirements are so steep and require so much time.

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And you might wait months to actually see any money come from that. And so I’m wondering if you could talk about the importance of being flexible and kind of just trusting folks you know

implicitly to spend the money that you give them, and I guess anything that comes to mind around that.

Klie Kliebert: Yeah. The most important thing to be able to do this work is trust, and so we put a lot of intention into how we do things and maintaining our relationships. We have tried to set up our group policy-wise and internally in ways that allow us to be flexible. So we're not a nonprofit. We are fiscally sponsored by a nonprofit who trusts us to do our work.

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They are also part of the big group with the Southern Movement Assembly. And so they both trust us and we’re held accountable by mostly, like, Southern elders who have been doing this much longer than us. So that legal setup gives us the flexibility to do what we need to do and quickly. Internally on our team, though, we have to have a lot of trust with each other. We have advisors but we don’t have a board of directors other than our fiscal sponsor’s board, but it means that when something happens as a team, we’re able to quickly make a decision and be, like, “We’re gonna do this thing,” or, “We're gonna try this thing.” And it removes a lot of the red tape there. There’s pros and cons to that. We have learned that there are pros and cons to all kind of setups.

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[Dog whining] [Laughter] Again, sorry for my dog. Yeah, that’s the number one thing. We are not sure that it can be done the way that it’s done in another way that requires more and more layers.

Carly Berlin: Um-hm.

Klie Kliebert: We have had to experiment a lot. Actually, with Hurricane Laura, we had an emergency cash program. We used ATMs, and we did cardless ATMs. I think we sent out twenty-five thousand through that, and that was for folks who had evacuated. And we learned things from that, too. Who knows if it would’ve gotten approval from a board quickly while they were here and actually needing— that money was for folks to do whatever they want, but we actually chose an amount that would allow them to get home for their FEMA assessments and back.

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And so we calculated gas money for an SUV from New Orleans to Southwest Louisiana and back, and that’s how we came up with the amount that we did. Those kind of things, we make those decisions based off of facts and assumptions that we’ve learned over the years, but we don’t have to get them approved by twenty people [Laughter] before moving ahead. It also puts us at risk as organizers. I’ll be honest about that. It’s not the safest job to have, doing something that is different from what’s been done in terms of formal, large, national nonprofits or government agencies or what have you. They all have a lot more safety measures in place for their organizers.

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And so we’re trying to figure out what that looks like for us as individuals. For example, when we’re giving out cash, we can flag fraud systems just by, like, “Oh, you’ve given cash to two hundred people in hotels.” The IRS will see that and be, like, “Um, not sure if this is legitimate.”

Carly Berlin: [Laughter]

Klie Kliebert: And so there’s a lot of considerations, too, that come into play when we’re doing this work.

Carly Berlin: Yeah, that makes sense. We have now kind of hit these different disasters, I guess barring the tornado, which is the most recent one, but I’m wondering if you can just talk about over the last two years and change what are some of the most rewarding moments, lessons learned, and what are some of the most challenging ones that stand out?

Klie Kliebert: Yeah.

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Rewarding moments. I think for me it’s when I see somebody’s mindset shift, ‘cause that’s actually much harder to do than to hand somebody water. I know that people need water, but for the long run we need a lot of mindsets to shift. And so I see that happen in person and online sometimes, too. And every now and then somebody will actually reach out to me and be, like, “Hey, somebody said this thing in y’all’s group, or you said this thing, or I just thought about this thing after interacting with a mutual aid effort and I realized that I don’t actually need to do x, y, z, which makes it harder for people to receive services.” Or, “Oh, I do have the power to do this thing a little bit differently.” That’s the best moment ever when that happens.

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I get excited when things— again, like with the Community Power Map, when there’s a shift like that, ‘cause ultimately mutual aid is a response to systems failure. Mutual aid is not how we should be forced to live all the time. It should be an indicator of things failing. That’s been true throughout history, and it pops up in times of crisis. It popped up in response to the Haitian Revolution. That’s when you see a bunch of mutual aid. And so the hope is that our efforts, and by “ours” I mean, like, collectively, not just Imagine Water Works, are highlighting something, and then people shift. And hopefully governments shift a little ‘cause, like it or not, we are part of it, and we are governed by these systems.

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Those are the most rewarding things. The hardest thing is burnout. I’m sure that’s probably echoed from everyone, especially right now. There’s the combination of COVID and all of the storms and a bonus tornado, just— it’s a lot for people to handle. Again, keeping our team as small as we can, but also trying to take care of our team so that we can carry knowledge and experience forward, that’s a really tough one, and I think we’re still feeling it out, honestly. I’m sure there’s just so many more. [Laughter] We’ve learned so many things. One hard thing is resources sometimes.

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We’ve been very lucky to have a lot of donations in the past year, and who knows if those will continue. We’re also using them as quickly as possible because they are in response to storms.

But before that, especially, we didn’t have an office to put things in. We still have a pretty small office when you're considering all of the supplies we’re moving. We still bring stuff in and out of our homes. We are led by trans folks and BIPOC folks who are from here. We don’t have this generational wealth or salaries from other places that allow us to buy a warehouse or something in the city. We actually have the least access to land here and to buildings and all of that just by nature of being from here, honestly, and the inequities that our families have dealt with.

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So that’s been a barrier that we’re still trying to figure out ‘cause as there are more storms there’s a bigger need for actual physical space. But I like talking about the good stuff, honestly. [Laughter] So I think I would like to cushion that with just, like, the importance of joy and how we do keep trying to come back around to that and talk about how important that is and figure out how to weave that throughout everything. And I think that we can do it here. In New Orleans of all places, surely, we can figure out how to incorporate joy throughout all of our mutual aid efforts, too.

Carly Berlin: I’m wondering also if you can just talk about the term “mutual aid” a little bit, ‘cause I think you and I have talked about this a little bit before too, but I think for a lot of folks the pandemic was kind of their introduction to this term.

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And I’m curious how and when you came to it and kind of what it means to you?

Klie Kliebert: Yeah. So mutual aid has been around by that name or not forever. I’d start with that. But in New Orleans specifically it has been around specifically by that name for hundreds of years, so it’s not new here. Those of us who grew up here grew up with the social aid and pleasure clubs. Those are all mutual aid societies. Some of them have actually had that name in the past and lost it. Some have never been named that, but they consider themselves that. There's also, in the emergency management world, something called mutual aid agreements, and that’s between state governments. And so it’s a very complex word with a long history.

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And I feel like there’s a redefining of it right now, too, as cash. I see, like, “Mutual aid equals cash,” which is not actually true. Cash is a part of mutual aid, but cash is often a charitable model. I have nothing against charity. I engage in it. I think it’s very important as part of it, but mutual aid is meant to be mutual. It’s meant to create strong communities and strengthen our bonds, and to acknowledge every human as somebody who can give and receive. In New Orleans, our mutual aid has been guided again by, like, the Haitian Revolution, the French Revolution. It’s been also guided by Indigenous nations here.

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Outside New Orleans it’s been part of, like, the Black Panthers’ food program. There are mutual aid societies, Chinese ones, in the 1700s in, I want to say, in either New York or California. Don’t quote me on that. [Laughter] And so, for me, it’s actually just very reinvigorating to think about it not being just this moment. I don’t think we need to be an inventor of a thing. I think it’s

actually much stronger to know that people have done this for a long time, they’ve gotten tired, they’ve gotten reinvigorated, they’ ve taken breaks. The baton has been passed, other generations have picked it up. Our generation is not the end-all be-all of this. There’s so much more support out there, and the world just keeps going. So I do like to talk with people sometimes about—we’re not just us alone in this moment trying to invent this whole new way.

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We are trying to invent some new ways, but we have a huge history and a future to stand on, I think.

Carly Berlin: Sort of on that note, what are your hopes and visions for the future of this work, particularly however many months we are out from Ida, eight or nine, I guess, at this point, and kind of heading into a new hurricane season?

Klie Kliebert: Yeah. I hope that this work continues to be sustainable. When I was first thinking about this the other day I was, like, “I hope that the work is sustainable.” And then I realized, ten years, I guess it is. [Laughter] I guess it is sustainable. So I hope it continues to be, and that we continue to learn ways to take care of each other throughout it.

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I hope it becomes sort of like our water sector work, that it is so widely done and so many people are interested in it that it just becomes the norm and then we can continue shifting and growing other pieces that are not totally seen yet. As an organization we also do a lot of research and sharing out, and we do advocacy work. We would love to do more climate work. We publish

pieces and we try to convince emergency managers to consider local folks deeply and in action. And so, yeah, I hope that everything we’ve worked on continues to grow organically in community so that we can continue to fill gaps.

Carly Berlin: I’m curious if there are kind of pieces that you’re excited to explore and grow that have been maybe on the backburner because of so much focus on emergency preparedness and response over the last few years?

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Klie Kliebert: Yeah. Good question.

Carly Berlin: [Laughter]

Klie Kliebert: I think often about just our relationship to each other and to the land. I think a lot about colonization. I want those conversations to show up more in our work here. But they are deep, heavy ones, and it requires a society that doesn’t already feel super heavy. But I hope that we get more space to talk about those things. I do want us to do more advocacy. I am excited about a thing right now that is prep based, but is doing it a little bit differently. So we are taking our *Queer/Trans Guide to Hurricane Season* and we’re turning it into a zine, and we’re incorporating art throughout.

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And so the analogy I actually used when telling my team about it was, like, I actually want the art to be like the crawfish.

Carly Berlin: [Laughter]

Klie Kliebert: I do use a lot of food analogies. And the prep tips are actually like the corn and potatoes. I want people to come for the art and for the healing and for all of that goodness. That should be the meat of it, and then it’s, like, “Oh, reminder, if you’re trans and you need things like extra binders or something to refrigerate your medicine or whatever, make sure you do that. Now, here’s this beautiful poem, or here’s this beautiful picture where you feel seen.” So we’re putting together something like that right now that will point people back to our big prep guide if they want that.

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But our dream is to do that for different populations. So we’re starting with queer and trans folks, ‘cause our entire team is queer and trans. Everyone who’s working on that project is trans specifically, and that was our first sort of special guide that we put out, so this is the one that we’re leaning into for the first one. But we want to do one for undocumented folks, for immigrants, for caregivers, parents, the elderly. There’s just so many different very specific things that don’t show up in your everyday prep that is specific to these communities. Our big dream is just, like, a love note to each community so that we can sort of rethink how we are preparing. And then, we’re also doing new events where we’re talking about preparing for the good and trying to flip that around a little bit.

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So we’re talking a lot about our favorite storm memories, which you don’t hear a lot. So for me, one of them is playing guitar with my dad. So my prep tip is, like, make sure you have your instrument, and now you’re preparing for a good thing. Sometimes that’s food. Somebody else’s favorite memory recently was barbecuing after a storm came. Like, that was actually a good time. Okay. So what kind of food do you want to have for your barbecue? So we’re kind of shifting how we think about that stuff so that we’re not ignoring that we have to keep prepping, but we are doing it, or at least trying to do it, differently and with more awareness about how we feel in our spirit and in our bodies right now.

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Carly Berlin: Those were mostly my questions, but is there anything that I didn’t ask about that feels important to include or end on?

Klie Kliebert: I think I’d just like to highlight again the importance of place and really considering— obviously, I’m biased, but Indigenous leadership in our mutual aid efforts. Mutual aid is very place based. Even when we’re on the internet we’re meeting in person, though. And we’re seeing thousands of networks specific to a place. And so it stands to reason that you want to think about the place itself. I think a lot of the success we’ve had in our work has been those Indigenous connections and understandings of the land and responsibility to the land.

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And so I’d really like to see that not be an afterthought and instead be on the forefront of people’s minds when they’re thinking about, like, “Where should I plug in?” or, “What should

my mutual aid project look like?” It should look like a relationship to the place, because it is. It always is.

Carly Berlin: I think that’s a good note to wrap on. I’m gonna do one other funny radio thing and just get some background noise of the room for, like, a minute-ish. That’ll just help mix together, so I’m just gonna start that.

[End]