Spirit Paris McIntyre

New Orleans, LA

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Interviewer: Carly Berlin

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

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Carly Berlin: Great. So, I am Carly Berlin. I'm here with Spirit McIntyre for our interview for this project on mutual aid and food in New Orleans during the pandemic and after Hurricane Ida. We are at my home in the Bayou St. John neighborhood of New Orleans. And the date today is April 11th, 2022. All right. So, to start off, would you mind just introducing yourself for the recorder? Tell us who you are and what you do.

Spirit Paris McIntyre: Yes. My name is Spirit Paris McIntyre. I use they/them pronouns. And you said who am I?

Carly Berlin: Yeah, who you are and what you do, however you would like to answer that question?

Spirit Paris McIntyre: I do lots of different things. So, when I think about who I am, I'm a musician, a cellist, a singer, writer.

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I help facilitate workshops on a variety of subjects. I care about community a great deal. I'm a reiki practitioner. I do visual art in different activism communities, so lots of different things.

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

Spirit Paris McIntyre: Not at all. August 1st, 1977.

Carly Berlin: Awesome. Where were you born and/or how did you get to New Orleans?

Spirit Paris McIntyre: Oh, I can do both. I was born in Hyattsville, Maryland, which is right outside D.C., about 10 minutes. And New Orleans, I've been in New Orleans since November 3rd, 2010. I moved here from Philadelphia. Did you say how I got here?

Carly Berlin: Yeah.

Spirit Paris McIntyre: So, I think ultimately how I got here was abhorring the cold.

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So, I had like the last—maybe it was 2009 since I made it to New Orleans in 2010. But I think 2009 winter in Philadelphia was just like, okay, this is it. I'm done. The snow was up to my maybe knees or thighs, and I was like, you know what? This is enough. I despise this, and I was just like I really can't stand the cold. And a friend who lives here was like, "McIntyre, you said you weren't going to do another winter in Philadelphia." And this was probably like the summer of 2010. And, as I said, I moved here on November 3rd, 2010. So, just that little goading and reminder, like, oh, snap, yes, I remember how miserable I was in 2009 winter.

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And, so, that propelled me, and New Orleans was a place, one of the places that I visited that was warm. And I was like, okay, this is a warm place. I'm familiar, and I knew maybe a handful, literally, like a handful of people, and I was like that might be enough. So, I packed my instrument, a couple of bags, some spices, and got on the Greyhound— no, the Amtrak, and came to New Orleans.

Carly Berlin: It's so funny. I feel like there is a real connection between Philly and New Orleans. I know so many people who have moved in between.

Spirit Paris McIntyre: Yeah. It's been very interesting since I moved here. And a friend recently moved here maybe a month ago from Delaware, Philly.

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So, there are quite a few folks here from Philly. And also I've definitely had the experience of being anywhere in New Orleans, and having somebody call my name out, and be a Philly connection that doesn't live here.

Carly Berlin: Huh, that's so funny.

Spirit Paris McIntyre: Like, this happened three days ago.

Carly Berlin: [laughter]

Spirit Paris McIntyre: And I was just like— random person I hadn't seen in like 15 years was like, "Spirit, Natural Selection." We were in this band, Natural Selection. And I was just like, "José?"

Carly Berlin: [laughter]

Spirit Paris McIntyre: Like, it was wild, and I've had that, in my time in New Orleans, I've had that a number of times specifically with like, "Yo, Philly." And not a plan … Yeah, this place [laughter] —

Carly Berlin: Yeah. I love that. Had you spent time in New Orleans before coming down here?

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Spirit Paris McIntyre: I did. The third time I came to New Orleans was when I moved here. The first two— one was traveling with a friend, who is now an ancestor. Which is wild, Daviná. Na Tanyá Daviná Stewart. She and I— at the time I identified as a girl, and so we did this Bald Girls Tour, and so we stopped at different people's homes, different cities, and New Orleans was one of them. So, I think we were here for like a week pre-Katrina, so maybe 2003. And, so, we did a tour here for a week, and we were like, oh, my gosh, this place is magical, the art scene, the poetry scene, 'cause Daviná was all around artist but, like, a wordsmith of the highest degree.

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So, we were in a lot of poetry community when we came. And, so, that was the first time. Second time was from that experience, I was here with my cello in that experience, and so I met Monica Dillon, a New Orleans musician who now, I think, moved away. She was doing an album, and so I came maybe 2004 or even 2005, pre-Katrina, and recorded on her album. And then the third time was when I moved here.

Carly Berlin: Very cool. One of the things that the SFA sort of asks us to do is to ask folks about their childhood and growing up and, also, relationship with food.

Spirit Paris McIntyre: So many things. I'm thinking about a lot of connections that have to do with the work and the reason why we're talking, so I'll get to that, but also relationships to food.

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I grew up with a mom and dad who themselves grew up very poor. My mom is Jamaican from Claremont, Hanover, which is part of a parish in Jamaica, and so she grew up like in the hills, tiny, little unpaved paths. Even now, it's like— I'm moving my hands for folks who aren't here. [laughter]

Carly Berlin: [laughter]

Spirit Paris McIntyre: But it's a really treacherous drive to where she lived and grew up.

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It's mountain side, very rocky, very high, and they don't have indoor plumbing. Right? I think this still might be true. My sister and I visited like three or four years ago, and saw where she grew up, the house she grew up in, and met up with the folks in the house who knew her, and she grew up with them. Water, there's a stream, and we saw someone carrying water up the road while we were there, and so catching water from a fresh water stream, putting it on your head, walking it up or having a donkey, if you're lucky, to bring the water up.

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So, my mom grew up in that kind of environment, and also lots of access to fruit trees. So, it's like abundant fruit trees, a different type of like not having, because it's like, okay, you have access to this water stream and access to sugarcane trees or sugarcane stalks and ackee trees. Ackee is a type of fruit native to Jamaica. Other kinds of fruits that she would mention growing

up. It felt like what she didn't have in money, she had in resource. But that's what she had. Birthdays, celebrations, Christmas was about what they baked.

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Her mother, my grandmother, Esmine Sylvia James Lyseight, was an incredible baker, hand-sewed clothes, taught folks how to iron, cook on coals. So, a lot of access to resource in that way of like skill-sharing and knowing, but not what we in the States or in certain parts of Jamaica would call wealthy. And then my dad grew up in Isabella, a small coal town called Isabella, Pennsylvania, and grew up without. He had so many siblings, I think somewhere between 13 and 15 siblings, and he was an orphan by the time he was 7, and had also lost his twin sister by the time he was 7, so dealt with a lot of loss, and was raised by his older sister, who was 17.

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So, there were times in his life where he had to eat sauerkraut, which is like salt, cabbage, and water, for days and nights, and days and nights, and days and nights. And he hated sauerkraut. Like, as an adult, he's like absolutely not, right? So, that's who my parents— part of their stories, and my dad is now an ancestor— Paris McIntyre, two-thirds of my name. But they grew up with and without many things, and the home that I grew up in, I never experienced a hungry night or even I don't think I grew up being like, "We don't have. We don't have." And also my sister and I were classically trained, which takes money.

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I didn't grow up rich but it takes some investment in being able to have your kids rent classical instruments, take lessons. So, just to think about food in that way, really grateful to have grown up with having food and having access to food. And, in addition of that, having Jamaican heritage, so having that influence food that I ate and food that I know about, and then Black American heritage, so having that food, those foodways. Because my dad's experience of food very different than my mom's experience of food, and made for a very dynamic household of food.

Carly Berlin: That's great. And you mentioned also just sort of tie-ins to this work that we're talking about.

Spirit Paris McIntyre: Totally.

Carly Berlin: I'm wondering if you can talk about that too.

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Spirit Paris McIntyre: And this is cool because it combines both my mom and dad. So, my mom still works, she's 80, at this church that I grew up in, Third Street Church of God in Northwest D.C. H er pastor, the pastor I grew up with, Jamaican pastor that she knew from growing up in Jamaica. And my dad was very active. They were both very active members of this church. That's how they met. And part of the church's program at the time was this outreach to, how they referred to it, homeless folks in and around where our church was, which is very close to the Capitol in D.C., so that area.

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And, so, it was a huge part of the service of that church, when I was growing up, to feed unhoused community members. And, so, every Sunday, and then I think they did it throughout the week as well, but every Sunday specifically, they would— was it Sunday? Oh, this might've been daily. It wasn't Sunday. It was like daily, I would say Monday through Friday, they did a breakfast program. S o, if you googled Third Street Church of God in D.C. breakfast program, it would come up because it was a huge thing. It was like every day, they would feed unhoused community members. They would first have a service, a short service, music, prayer, and then they would close that morning service with breakfast, so like grits, eggs, and coffee.

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And throughout the week, I feel like there was also— because we would bring home— my mom would bring home some of these, a bag for our household too. It would be like government cheese. It'd be like cans of vegetables, maybe sometimes fresh vegetables. Like, that was a huge part also, and so growing up just seeing that as part of like, oh, this is what churches do. This is what community does. This is what my dad and mom do. So, I've just had visceral moments in working with Southern Solidarity that I would have those visceral moments of like, oh, this is ancestral because my dad used to do this aspect of this work.

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Or moments of feeling— moments of maybe feeling scared, or perhaps thinking that I should feel scared, and being like, oh, well, this is working with community, and trying not to have— like, really silencing the fear of community, especially Black community. And, so, I'd be like,

oh, I have a connection to this that's deeper than me doing it in this right now moment. This is something my dad would've been a part of, and had been a part of. And then also my dad, never in my lifetime of knowing him, but previous to me being here, and my sister, had drug and alcohol addiction. And, so, that was another piece that felt connected to, like, okay, some of the people when I— not these people.

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Some of the folks that I would see while doing Southern Solidarity work, I would think to myself, "That could have been my dad," or if they were young enough, "Oh, that was my dad." I'm just like, ooh, if not for my dad, for him finding church and finding a different way, some of the folks that I served in Southern Solidarity, that could've been my dad as an elder.

Carly Berlin: Yeah. That's a great segue for last week when we were chatting, you were telling me a little bit about how you came to be involved with what would become Southern Solidarity early in the pandemic. But I'm wondering if we can really go back to that moment in March 2020. What was going on? How did you find out about this work that was going on, and tap into it?

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Spirit Paris McIntyre: So, it is really important to go back to the moment because, even though we're only in April of 2022, so much has happened. And perspective, like being able to look back and put something in a perspective that maybe it didn't exist in, or being in this moment where it's like, oh, there is a vaccine and a booster and masks, of course, right, none of

that— just these ways of being able to look back at something and with so much knowledge. So, I'll take it to like February 2020. I'm not sure when Mardi Gras was that year.

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But it was like that in New Orleans and around the world, like, Mardi Gras was such a ground zero for the pandemic, and not just in the States because people come to New Orleans from all over for Mardi Gras. It's like everybody from everywhere is here. And I wasn't here. I think, that year, I had a gig in Miami on Mardi Gras Day. But coming back and just— so, whenever it started, I guess, it was somewhere late February, maybe early March 2020. Jasmine Rogers or Jasmine Araujo, she uses both, an Afro-Latinx Black woman that I knew from community, from BIPOC queer events, seeing her around.

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I was on— this was after. Okay, so, pandemic hit, and early in the pandemic, but definitely the city had shut down even though it was early, and not knowing who, what, when, where, why, how the city shut down. And, so, inside, not really seeing much, not really knowing too much, or just being like what is happening? And I live alone, so it was just like, wow, I live alone. This is happening. I'm inside, just trying to figure it all out, and looking at Facebook, and seeing Jasmine.

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I'm not sure who was doing the driving at the time but, like, it wasn't Jasmine's car, so it was like a truck, and maybe two other folks. Also, at the time, Jasmine lived in not the French

Quarter, really, but like right off of Frenchmen, Frenchmen and Chartres, so very specifically lived in an area of town where she would have seen this huge change in the commerce of that area. I didn't live in that area, so I wouldn't have noticed it necessarily. But she was in a place to notice that, and more context, in that area right around Frenchmen, close to Royal, close to the French Quarter, close to all the touristy area.

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So, very much, she lived in the heart of a very touristy area, so saw that, once the lockdown hit, tourism not happening, and seeing how that impacted unhoused community that was living off of tourism, like, digging in the trash, or getting extra food from tourists who couldn't finish their meals, or like asking for money, whatever. Just like that that wasn't happening. That it's like, okay, nobody's visiting, so folks can't dig in the trash after. Just like these ways that are like, wow, that I would never have known.

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I don't even know if Jasmine would attribute that to all of what she was thinking about. But, to me, it felt very just like an astute, oh, this is happening. I see it. I understand. I understand that tourists aren't down here. That's one understanding. But understanding, oh, tourists aren't down here, and unhoused people are down here. Oh, unhoused people are living off of tourists in a certain way. Oh, now that that's not happening, what's happening to and for unhoused people? So, that just felt like some really astute— there's so much magic in that understanding of things,

and so very early on, Jasmine and other folks would gather. I think they would go by Costco, perhaps, grab water.

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Never soda, alw ays water, a sandwich. So, I don't know if they were making sandwiches. Like, a clementine or a couple clementines, so it would be like bags. And, so, I saw that very early like, oh, this is happening, and I was like excited about that. Like, oh, here's somebody I know and respect. Here's something I can be doing with myself because it's like, okay, by myself, not connected, not sure what's happening. So, very early on, before it had a name, and wasn't even looking to have a name, just like let's get together and help. And, so, I messaged Jasmine or something, or text her. I was just like, "How can I help?" or like, "What's going on?" And she was like, "Oh, meet me at my house, and this is what we're doing."

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And, so, that was like the very humble beginnings of what is now Southern Solidarity.

Carly Berlin: Can you, from there, just talk about how what became Southern Solidarity grew, and just what exactly it was and is now?

Spirit Paris McIntyre: What it was was people wanting to do something and help. And, at that time in New Orleans, there were— and I don't even know why, how there was all this support in New Orleans at that time. I'm not 100% sure but there was all of this support in the early parts of the pandemic.

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Like, I think the Red Cross was here but I don't know what motivated them to be in New Orleans specifically. I don't know. Maybe they were in other cities like this as well. Maybe it was because New Orleans was also an epicenter of the— I'm really not 100% sure. The Red Cross was here. I feel like maybe Army, Navy, Air Force folks were here maybe in support of that. There were just lots of people, and frontlines. There were a lot of doctors. It just felt like people are here. And, so, I mention that because part of what would become Southern Solidarity went from gathering up what folks could make themselves, so sandwiches, et cetera.

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By the time I got involved, which was maybe the second or third week of this type of support, which I guess was happening a couple days a week, part of what was happening was, like, there would be all this food leftovers, food waste, potential food waste from all of these people wanting to support frontline services. So, that's why I'm saying there was so much. So, part of what we became at that time was like, okay, here are leftover breakfasts from meals to support frontline workers. Here is some leftover dinners. So, it would be like repurposing like, oh, all of this is going to go to waste or, like, here is water in a plastic bag or water in some kind of plastic thing, or these random assortments of things that were coming from different places.

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So, I remember reassembling those kinds of things like, okay, oh, this is a random three boxes from this group that heard about Jasmine doing this support stuff. There were just ways that

people got really attracted to it on Facebook. Perhaps it was on Instagram at the time. So, it was also that. Like, oh, my gosh, there's so much waste at this time when people around New Orleans are like, "Yo, I just lost my job. How am I going to do this?" or like, "Suddenly, my kids are at home, and a meal that I didn't have to provide them, because they were at school, or two meals, like, not having to give them breakfast or lunch, and now they're home with me, and I'm providing two meals every day plus the weekends."

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So, it was all of this abundance, sometimes very overwhelming because it would be like what the hell are we going to do with this random assortment of shit? But, also, yes, okay, great. Okay, it's pancakes and cold scrambled eggs or like room-temperature scrambled eggs from earlier in the day. But, you know what? We will take those out in addition to these sandwiches that we're going to make, so we have this bag and also pancakes. And people were like, "Oh, my god, pancakes." So, it was really all of these things, so where it started, then where all of the abundance at that time in New Orleans. And so fielding— so, then it became like, oh, hotels knowing that we were doing this thing, and hotels that were feeding some of these frontline workers and their leftovers would be like, "Oh, you can come by at this time to grab these kind of leftovers."

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So, sometimes, it would be like a hodge-podge of all of that. And, at the time, Jasmine was in an apartment that also had a second floor that was empty. And, so, precarious short stairs that just

felt like half a stair, up, carrying food up, preparing, carrying food down, like, in her kitchen. Okay, we have a kitchen crew downstairs trying to socially distance but how can we? We're in a tight— we're just trying to do the best we can. So, we'd have a crew downstairs making lunch, making the same thing as the crew upstairs but trying to socially distance and be like, okay, putting sandwiches.

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Okay, you put sandwiches together. I'll put water and fruit in the bag. Okay. Oh, yes, great, now you can— oh you want to help? Okay, great, you can make sandwiches. So, figuring out to make these efficient sandwiches and be like, yo, y'all, lay 'em out, mayonnaise, mustard, cheese, meat. [claps] You put 'em in the bag. It would just be like folks trying to figure out an assembly line, trying to have efficiency because we wanted to get the food turned around pretty quickly, and then go do distribution. So, there was like food-making and then food distribution. Sometimes, people would be like, oh, I can do this hour, so maybe they were there for an hour helping to prep food, sandwiches, bags.

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And always like, okay, what are we putting them in? Do we have bags? Like, it's amazing what becomes what you need. So, we would have people snagging, grabbing bags from Dollar Stores so that we could put food in bags and get them out to people. And then we'd have different crews sometimes doing distribution, or some people would do the whole thing. And, so, distribution

would look like the back of a truck packed, packed, packed with food, people hanging off the back of them, people inside, and then we'd make a run until the food was gone.

Carly Berlin: Where would you go to distribute?

Spirit Paris McIntyre: That's a great question. Initially, we went to what we thought was the hardest hit.

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So, from Chartres and Frenchmen, we would maybe go to— there's a park off of Frenchmen, at maybe Frenchmen and Royal. There's a park right there.

Carly Berlin: I can picture it.

Spirit Paris McIntyre: Yes. So, we would go to like that park. Go down Esplanade towards Decatur, and then from Decatur, like kind of weave our way down Decatur because there would be unhoused folks all along the streets between— taking Decatur, there's a park right close to where the French Market is and Decatur. So, we'd hit all of there. And I don't know early on when we would run out of food.

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But it's soon became very clear that it's like, ooh, drop in the bucket because under a system of patriarchy, racism, capitalism, there are plenty of people who write off who won't get served as they make their money. So, it was just like, oh, snap, drop in the bucket of who needs help. So, we would run out of food very quickly, and then just see how we could increase our ability. We

started out with one truck, and the trucks would be like whoever had the truck. And then we would maybe have like a truck and a car as we increased our capacity for what we had or what we could distribute, and who could support.

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Then we got a truck donated so that that could be our Southern Solidarity truck. And it was a shift-stick, and I can't yet drive shift, so it would be like, okay, now we have a truck. Now we just need a driver. So, it very quickly became a production from this like very humble to like, okay, wow. And I felt like I got sucked in very quickly, sucked in totally, a desirable sucked in, and also like, oh, shit, just like all hands on deck. The problem is epic. Okay, show up. So, finding purpose, also a way to deal with the anxiety of the pandemic, also a way of being in community, also a way of helping other people, just like all these ways, and also putting these different skill sets of like my ability to problem-solve and think about how to do something efficiently, and thinking five steps ahead, which comes from Black trauma.

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But it's like, okay, putting all of that to use, you know?

Carly Berlin: Yeah. Tell me just more about what your involvement looked like, that process of getting sucked in. I want to hear more detail.

Spirit Paris McIntyre: It looked like showing up as much as I could, so being like, okay, Spirit. I think we started out several days a week and, eventually, moved to seven days a week. And I don't know what the schedule now is for Southern Solidarity.

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So, I was probably there as many days a week as I could do. I had a car at the time, and so just showing up and wanting to support. So, it looked like, I don't know, maybe three out of seven days, to start; four out of seven days. And it looked like making sandwiches, heating up soup because— 1000 Figs and a couple of other chefs from restaurants would make soup. And, so, we'd be packaging soup. Because I had a car, it also looked like going by, getting water, getting bags, like trying to support that way.

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It looked like driving, and packing my car with food, sometimes being the second car. So, we started like caravanning if we could have multiple cars and multiple food. It also looked like quickly learning, right, once you connect with people and learn their needs, it's often never that "I just need food" when people are living at multiple intersections of need. Rarely is it like one thing that's needed, especially for unhoused folks. And, so, it would be like, oh, of course, right? What do people need? What do I need as a person? And I don't live outside, so living outside, it's like, okay, where are you going to clean your underwear? So, underwear, okay, socks. Socks are huge, keeping your feet dry.

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If people are diabetic or hypertensive or all the other things that affect the feet, so it would be like socks, okay, then shoes, okay, then hygiene, okay, then blankets, okay, then tents, okay, then sleeping bags. So, it was just like, whew, the need. I don't know how it shifted. I can't

remember. But it felt pretty much overnight that donations or we were purchasing supplies to then create hygiene kits. My brain just really loves— I love figuring out an assembly line or being like, okay, we have toothpaste, toothbrush, soap, all these i tems. Okay, we have Ziploc bags. Okay, let's one, one, one, one, one, done, one, one.

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I love figuring out how to do that kind of stuff, so I felt very instrumental in helping to organize non-food donations, and figuring out how to make that a thing because we had a lot of support for food since we started out with food. So, people would come, knowing like food. So, it's like, okay, sandwiches, this, that, the other. So, that was like a pretty well-oiled machine in that way, maybe by like March, April. But then clothing, hygiene, that was another like, argh. So, getting that little part of the work together, I feel like I was very instrumental in organizing, figure out how are we going to organize all these clothing donations? Okay, I am really good at an army roll, and I travel a lot, so I army roll everything.

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It makes so much room. So, it would be like, okay, let's army roll, then let's tape, let's label. Okay, how are we going to tape and label? What needs to be on it so that people know these are pants, shirts? So, it felt like a next natural extension of Southern Solidarity was to go from food to including clothes, hygiene. And, so, then we started doing— the caravan would be figuring out, okay, how many times are we doing food? When do we have capacity to do food and non-

food? Eventually, it became known as the closet car because, like, my car resembled a closet or like a store. Front seat, bedding, tents if we had them.

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I had it really organized so it would be like, no, back seat left: "men's" in quotes pants, shirts. Back seat right: "women's" in quotes pants, tights, leggings, shirts. On crates stacked up, trunk: crate of underwear, crate of socks, crate of this, crate of that. It is amazing how much stuff you can fit in a car—

Carly Berlin: [laughter]

Spirit Paris McIntyre: — [laughter] if you really want to. So, then, we had the closet car. And at its height in my time at Southern Solidarity, it was like three times a week we would have a closet car: Monday, Wednesday, Friday.

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Carly Berlin: I'm curious, in that moment really early in the pandemic when everything was so uncertain, it sounds like being so focused on this work would be, I don't know the word exactly, but sort of clarifying. And I'm curious if you can talk a little bit more about the role it was playing in your life at the time.

Spirit Paris McIntyre: Yeah. Thank you for that. It helped to have something to organize around or to focus on, and usefulness. Living in sometimes a society and culture that is about

capitalism and can teach, like— so, being in a society that's so focused on capitalism, hitting a pandemic, and being like, boom.

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So, capitalism is in quotes "shut down" though it never really stopped for some folks. The highest ranked members of capitalism never stopped, in fact, got more money. Just like Jeff Bezos was like, "Whoop, whoop, I'mma make all this money." [laughter] So, having that kind of halt, that felt very clarifying where it was like, okay, so, clear on who's not going to save us, and never has had intentions on saving us. Looking at our government, and being like, wow, y'all don't care if we die. You don't care if we die, 'cause so many of us died. And having this to focus on where it's like, okay, I can't focus on those things because it's like that's not where life is. This is something I can help, and my skills are needed, and I can be in community with other people.

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So, it was a place of like refuge. It was a place of community, of connection. A way of like connecting also to people, like where are the people that want to help? Oh, great, this is what the people who want to help look like, and so it was a really interesting cross-section of community that I met during that time. It was doing a lot, a lot of support, a lot of also creative outlets. It is really creative to problem-solve. And it was also like exercise, because doing all of that was very physical: upstairs, downstairs, making lunch, carrying lunch, carrying water, carrying food. Okay, that person is two blocks away.

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We're going to park the car here, run up, run down, run over. So, it was very also that way too, very moving the body. So, I feel like it probably caused some anxiety but also just in terms of like feeling the largeness of people not having, and also was an outlet for being able to support, being able to move, being able to think, being able to engage, being able to hopefully help solve some problems, connecting with people, engaging with people.

Carly Berlin: At what point did this initiative come to be called Southern Solidarity?

Spirit Paris McIntyre: Maybe a couple months in. I feel like we had the name. . .

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It feels like it's always been, but maybe April or May? I don't know if we voted on it. I feel like there was a conversation like, "What do y'all think?" And there may have been another name that was bandied about. Jasmine would be a really good person to connect with about that, or Dahlak. Dahlak might know also. But it was like, okay, let's get some T-shirts, or let get something so that we're also noticeable because, at that time too, visually speaking, New Orleans French Quarter, French Market area looked like a ghost town. Businesses were boarded up. Nobody was out. So, it was also like, yo, y'all are out?

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So, there were ways that we were mobilized to help our community and also nobody is outside, except for unhoused people. It was really wild. The street was empty. We could be driving the

wrong way, which people do in New Orleans all the time anyway. It was just like, what? Is this a two-way? It is now.

Carly Berlin: [laughter]

Spirit Paris McIntyre: [laughter] Imagine being in a truck, being in a car, no one's out, so there was a feeling of like this is really badass too, to also be like nobody is fucking out here, except for people who are unhoused. No businesses are open. It's quiet. Police were like randomly about. But we also needed something that was just like, "We're doing good. Leave us alone." Because police love to do what they do. Love to police.

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It's just like, ugh. And, so, I feel like part of that was having a visible way that's like, "You've seen us every day this week, or you've seen us enough days this week. We're stopping here. There's nobody down here, there's nothing, and we are doing this." So, to also become known and seen, to be able to move with relative ease, especially as a group of Black and non-Black folks moving, and doing things that also felt very, like, nobody's thinking about this. So, we shut down the city. Everybody stay inside. If we don't support people staying inside, if people aren't actually inside to begin with, don't have a home, then it's like, oh, so leave some people to die? Stay inside.

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So, this felt very like, oh, we're not staying inside, and it's not just to party and show it on Instagram. It's like, no, we're not staying inside. We believe that— we know that COVID is real

and people need help, so all of those things combined. And needing a name, I think also a name helped to be like, okay, do you want to fund this, you're seeing it online? This is how you can do it. Give it even more relevancy or just visual appeal, so that we could be getting donations. And Jasmine wrote a bunch of grants, other people wrote grants, to just bring in resources for that as well.

Carly Berlin: I want to hear more about the folks you were serving. What was their reception when y'all started showing up, driving around with all this stuff?

0:51:04

Spirit Paris McIntyre: So many different types of reception. So, some people would be like, "Thank you," some people would be like, "Fuck you," depending on where people were, so a combination of that. Building relationships, even with people who would curse you out one day, and the next day be like, "Thank you," depending on if they were drinking, high, angry, frustrated. People at so many intersections, dealing with so much hurt, anger, pain, trauma. It is not easy to live outside, and living outside in New Orleans, even though this is a place that is warmer than other places. So, I can't imagine trying to live outside in Massachusetts or Minnesota.

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But this place is also storms. Every time we have bad weather, I'm just like how are the people outside? How do they make it? It's really incredible, and not in some kind of like they're so resilient, because fuck resilience. It's incredible/horrible, awful that people have learned how to,

and have to learn how to survive outside, because their government, their state doesn't— won't take care of them; chooses not to. There was a lot of loveliness of just like seeing people regularly, and remembering their names, and having them remember you, and see you, about "How are you doing today?"

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Even being able to just exchange like, "This food isn't going to solve all your problems," and knowing that, and also being like, "It's good to see you. How are you?" or like, "Oh, you're not happy today?" or like, "Oh, you're cursing at me today? Okay. Would you like some food? Be that as it may, would you like some of this food? No? Okay, cool." A lot of beautiful, complex, talented people live without homes.

Carly Berlin: Part of what I am sort of curious about exploring in this project is, I think for a lot of folks, the pandemic was the first time that they learned about what mutual aid is, and just this idea of solidarity, not charity, and not needing people you're serving to fill out lots of paperwork, and be eligible for X, Y, and Z thing.

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And, so, I'm curious how y'all were thinking about that at that time.

Spirit Paris McIntyre: The violence of not making sure people have what they need as a life practice, it's like, so, what do you do with my taxes? [laughter] It is so violent to then put in barriers. Like, "So, you need things? Here are all these barriers." It's just like, how dare you? How dare you ensure that I don't have the things that I need, and then put in barriers to getting

them? So, how we navigate it, well, it was just making food, and giving it out; putting clothes together, and giving it out. That's not to say we didn't have our own shit sometimes.

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But what I mean by "shit" is like trying to figure out, again, it's a set-up. It's a set-up where there's not enough, which is a lie. But we're sold the lie of there's not enough. There's scarcity when it's like, well, there's certainly not enough if you hoard it, you know? If not everyone has to pay taxes? I'm just like, if you go for the biggest fish, can you just hit up Jeff Bezos? Here's a list. Hit these folks up first. Then come see me about my taxes. How fantastic would that be if we all made a list of like, "No, no, here's somebody I think you should talk to"?

Carly Berlin: [laughter]

Spirit Paris McIntyre: "I think maybe Trump— have you heard of him? I think you should hit him up. I think Jeff Bezos has something for you."

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"I think the founder of Apple, not here anymore, but I think his company might have something for you. I think Google might have a check waiting for you. Kmart, Walmart, I think these folks have something for you. The Hiltons, Kanye's in that crew now, so I think he got something for you. What are the other ones, Kanye's ex-wife? All of them, they got something for you. Go hit them up. Collect them taxes. I doubt you'd even be thinking about me after you see the abundance that collecting those taxes will get you then we can" — barriers where, scarcity

where? Feel ing that scarcity, and having that in these false terms, it be real, like the ways that hoarding, the ways that oppression have real present consequences.

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So, there'd be times when it's like, oh, my gosh, we do not have it. We are volunteers. So, trying to express this to people where it's also like, "Fuck your explanation." And I'm like, "I know, it's fucked up. It's terrible. I am not responsible for this mess that we are in. However, I am witness to it, and I'm witness to how it's impacting me, and how it's impacting you. And I see like you need a sleeping bag. Of course, you do. You should not have to lay your body on the cement. This should not be a reality, and it is, and we don't have sleeping bags." And we would figure out how are we going to bulk order them? Can we get people to donate them? And sometimes we could.

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Also, how businesses live up to the hype of scarcity, where it's like y'all could be giving us all your sleeping bags, and just accounting for how much it is. And when you do your taxes, it's gonna help you. So, sometimes, we would get donations of the things and the tents, but it was often not enough. And, so, there would be ways where we'd have to document. Like, how are we going to document this, to also be like, who do we give a tent to so that we have some accountability for the resources that we're helping to move? And you'd be like, okay, "Boo, we're out of tents. I know. Yes, you're angry. I know it." Sometimes, it would feel really hard to

be like, “We don’t have enough tents. We don’t have enough sleeping bags,” because the actual issue is not these sleeping bags and these tents.

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It is the way that our government, our society, our world is hoarding resources that put us in this position of, like, you’re having to ask for it, or needing, or not having a tent or a sleeping bag. It’s just so wild. So, there were times when it felt like that no barrier thing that we were going for, it’s like, well, there are barriers, and we’re trying to not erect them but, also, we are facing them.

Carly Berlin: That segues just into a broader question around challenges y’all faced throughout this time.

Spirit Paris McIntyre: All the challenges. [laughter]

Carly Berlin: [laughter]

Spirit Paris McIntyre: Because you don’t get to be like, “Time out.” [laughter] “Time out, oppression.” [laughter] We’re just trying to do this.

0:59:57

We’re just trying to do this little thing. So, all the things, the reality of whiteness within our group, and being like [sighs], okay, well-intentioned, good-meaning white people, whatever that is, it’s like, “Oh, my god, get your shit together.” So, just sometimes having to face that, and being like, “Okay, listen, you’re doing a lot of very white things right there. Get that together.

Get it together. Do you see it? Can you see it?" So, I think, yes, to folks seeing mutual aid for the first time, and I was definitely— I didn't know this term of "mutual aid" maybe in the way I now not it, and was really— I'm so grateful for mutual aid, and that it's always been, like, people have always been aiding each other and helping each other.

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I have excess grapes, and you have excess tomatoes, and let's swap them. It's very indigenous practice, and to see it activated and continuing in these ways, or to see certain aspects of mutual aid being activated— and, within that, some folks for the first time, it's like, yes, oh, my gosh, we all come to the knowledge when we come to the knowledge, and it's just like, yes. And some folks live at intersections that keep them from having to know the knowledge. And, so, sometimes with Southern Solidarity, it was like coming face-to-face with people who are today years old, and getting the knowledge, and being like, okay, so, you are today years old?

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And you're showing it in every way that you're showing up, but you're showing up, and you're showing up. So, it was like really negotiating that, and in negotiating that, negotiating violence; not all the time. But one time I had— content warning; violent context coming. But when doing the closet car, I one time had [waiting for garbage truck to pass] a community member threaten to put me in my trunk.

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With the closet car, my trunk was open, so it wasn't like a vague threat. It was a very specific threat, and it was just like, hmm, right, and I felt it was like a real and present danger. To that time, like, definitely I had seen violence between people because, yes, of course, there's violence. Oppression is violence. Not having is violence. Living on the street is violent. So, people are experiencing violence, and doing the best that they know how. [waiting for garbage truck to pass]

1:04:02

Seeing that level of violence, and not seeking to blame people for the situations they're in, just the reality of like when you don't have— when I'm hungry, I could definitely be like, ooh, you know what? Violence [laughter] is coming. I'm sleepy. I'm tired. I'm angry. I'm traumatized. I've been harmed. I'm frustrated. I'm bit up by mosquitos and rats. I got violence readily accessible, and ready to blow off some steam. So, those kinds of things, having to be able to work in the moment, solve problems in the moment, take a deep breath in the moment, educate in the moment, be educated in the moment, yeah, a lot of in-the-work training on the job of mutual aid, and supporting community members, supporting oneself, supporting each other.

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And with that system of, well, with racism, with oppression, with patriarchy comes all the things too of being like, okay, how can we engage with each other in ways that aren't patriarchal, are less patriarchal, are less homophobic, are less racist, are less ableist, are less anti-Black? So, all

of the yes and of all of those things at play, and being like, okay, we've got a community to serve, and we're part of it.

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So, with Southern Solidarity, and I'm not sure how this is working right now, but we started to have a BIPOC, Black Indigenous People of Color is what that stands for, BIPOC, leadership intentionally, and then we also had white— what was the white? No, white— it wasn't— white accountability? Maybe it was maybe called the white accountability so that white-passing and white members of Southern Solidarity could be in community together, skill up, hold each other accountable, do that stuff that only they should be doing, to try and mitigate, and be accountable, and train, and talk openly, and learn some things, heal some things.

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There was also, like, in terms of not charity, and Southern Solidarity not being a charity, was also skilling up, like reading. My participation was very much like, I'm in it in this way. I'm in it like planning, putting together, being in motion. But I was not so much in— well, I was in some of the trainings. But there was book reading at the time that just didn't feel very accessible to me, for my own reasons, so people could get more politically minded with books from Black feminist lenses.

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Again, Jasmine would be a great person to talk to about that stuff. But we also did trainings that were, like, I, myself, and another participant, Ryan, created a training to help people deconstruct

gender— it was called Deconstructing Gender— to just kind of bring that into the work, bringing in wellness. I forget all the different trainings that we had, but to get together to just continue to skill up, educate, train one another, learn.

1:09:01

Carly Berlin: A lot of what you've talked about has been, I think, about those sort of early months of the pandemic, and now we're fully two years out from that. I guess I'm wondering if you can talk about how your involvement in Southern Solidarity evolved and changed over that period of time.

Spirit Paris McIntyre: Thank you. It evolved from showing up, helping, supporting as best I could to helping to build systems, so the system of closet car, the system of getting donations, the system of how do we think about how we can continuously get donations? How do we train?

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In the beginning, I would say, in my first, let's say like March to December, February, let's say my first year, I was really physically involved, engaged, going to thrift stores to shop for clothing, donations, putting them together, organizing. And then I would say my second year, so we're thinking about February, March 2021 through, I would say, December 2021-ish or September 2021, I was—

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In the first year, I was also doing a lot of distribution, so driving. I knew the routes, help training the routes, be like, oh, here's— we also broke from doing one caravan to two caravans because we noticed that there's at least, but like two groups. So, we want to hit the French Quarter, French Market, Canal Street but we also have folks all along Calliope and Tchoupitoulas Street that need serving. And doing both means like a three-, four-hour physically taxing shift. And, also, for community, it's anywhere from, like, you're getting food at 5:30 till you're getting food at 10 p.m. Not very kind. So, it helped us take an extremely long route, cut it in half.

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So, that was like revolutionary for us. [laughter]

Carly Berlin: [laughter]

Spirit Paris McIntyre: So, mapping those kinds of things out, doing a lot of physical work, driving. But in the second, in 2021, really slowing down on some of that, but doing a lot of physically, like, preparing meals. We moved locations a couple of times. So, I'm thinking about when we moved from Jasmine's house to Julia Street. There was an art gallery, a warehouse on Julia Street that was shut down basically in the pandemic, so we worked out of there. Then we shifted to the First Unitarian Church at Claiborne and Jefferson. By that time, by the time we had moved into the Claiborne— to First— the UU Church, I was mainly prepping, and prepping food, training people how to prep food, training people on a variety of, like, here's how you do— this is how you can make 150 sandwiches in an hour and a half.

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It looks like this. And creating those plans, creating like, okay, here's how you prep a closet car. So, I feel like in 2021, it was more like that. And I think some of that was just shifting capacity. Like, more work was coming up for me. And then, also, the reality of the pandemic, 2020 for me was probably like reactionary, high adrenaline, go, go, go, go, go, go.

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And 2021 started to sink in like, oh, this is still happening, and you cannot go at that— that's not sustainable, so realizing a more sustainable pace and, also, needing more help, asking for more help, getting more help, consistent help, training people. And then by September 2021, a lot of the work that I was doing pre-pandemic and more was just coming back again and just being like, you know, Spirit, what's real about your capacity and how it's shifted, and where do you need to put your energies right now? So, I recognize, like, oh, I don't have it, and it wasn't sustainable, necessarily, the way that I was doing it, or maybe I should say it was what was required at the time.

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And then it was like, oh, let's shift, and I did. I feel really good about having helped a lot, put in a lot of leadership. I had someone message me a couple days ago, Dan Bingler.

Carly Berlin: I know Dan.

Spirit Paris McIntyre: I don't know how you say his last name.

Carly Berlin: I honestly don't either. [laughter]

Spirit Paris McIntyre: Dan. He sent me a couple messages just thanking me for the ways that I taught him more leadership things. I've seen that from a bunch of different people, so I feel really grateful for doing my part, what I could do in 2020 and 2021, and doing it in different ways now.

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But being able to sew seeds with a lot of people that, maybe for the first time, were coming because their intersections were like, oh, shit, things are not just— it's like [snaps fingers] better late than never, and welcome to the party. Catch up. [snaps fingers] It's been a long time coming, so you got to get this information. So, I feel like I did a lot of supporting people getting that information.

Carly Berlin: What does your involvement look like at this point?

Spirit Paris McIntyre: My involvement looks like no involvement, which was really, like, being able to— I sent— I think maybe it was earlier this year, because we're in 2022. So, it started for me being— like really September of 2021, it was really like, Spirit, I don't think you have— you don't have physical capacity with other things that you want to be doing to do this work the way that you were doing it.

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I also no longer have my car. My car was like, "I'm going to that great goodnight." [laughter]

Carly Berlin: [laughter]

Spirit Paris McIntyre: My car was a huge part of how I helped and support, which was fine. I could still support in different ways but that changed my sustainabil…like, how I could show up. That was like halfway through the year in 2021. So, by September, it was really like I don't think— can I still support? How can I still support? So, supporting in more offhand ways like, "Oh, let me see if I can connect you with someone who can train you," or like, "I trained this person so I feel like that person can train this person. Let's get these people in place." Then really in maybe January, February of this year, being like, you know what?

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I have to shift. Thank you. I'm so grateful for all that I've learned, and so just stepping away, and so grateful for the people that continue to do Southern Solidarity. I'm not sure what it's looking like these days. But I'm grateful to have been a part.

Carly Berlin: This is backtracking a little bit but I'm noticing that September 2021, also the aftermath of Hurricane Ida, and I think that's a real inflection point for a lot of [laughter] folks in terms of capacity.

Spirit Paris McIntyre: Right.

Carly Berlin: One of the other things I'm sort of interested in with this project is a lot of groups like Southern Solidarity, I think, came out of the pandemic, had this sort of infrastructure in place, and then this major hurricane hit.

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And, so, I'm curious to hear about what the work looked like in that moment of really, really acute crisis for a lot of folks.

Spirit Paris McIntyre: Thank you for saying that because it's like, oh, yes, and then that was happening. By that time in 2021, I was about to premier this piece with this dance group, ADT, Ananya Dance Theatre in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I was doing a lot of traveling in 2021 to finish this work that we were hoping to premier in 2020 but that wasn't gonna happen. So, I was actually out of town when Ida hit.

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I was scheduled to come back to New Orleans, but Ida was threatening, and so I was like, okay, I'll go home to Maryland, and watching from a distance. And, so, the ways that my involvement was slowing down and changing in 2021, and Ida hitting, and I'm being away, and then I came back like several weeks after, it was almost like— I saw people in Southern Solidarity were doing such great work to help during Ida and recovery. A lot of folks were in town. It was incredible to watch people being like, "Oh, I left town but I'll come in. I've got supplies. I'm going to sneak through this barrier that nobody's guarding, and I'll bring in whatever's needed. Tell me. Lists." So, it was incredible to watch the amount of community.

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It was almost like people had really gotten trained up in 2020 and most of 2021 to be, like, do what needs happening. Do what needs doing. So really that like, not laissez-faire; very active. And, so, seeing how folks could show up around Ida was really powerful, and watching folks be

able to see, like, oh, because it hit New Orleans in some ways but really outside of New Orleans in different areas and parishes, so really sending like all of these resources that were coming towards Southern Solidarity. And folks like Southern Solidarity, it was like, "Oh, great. So, it's coming. Push out. It's coming. Push it out there." So, that was really powerful to see. And I wasn't a huge part of that, and I think there were some ways that it was like, okay, Spirit, you don't have it in you to do like you did in 2020.

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But there was a lot that had been put in place before 2020 for many groups, but in 2020 for Southern Solidarity, in 2021, that made that time very organized, very potent. It was just like, oh, this is how it works. If you're working it and flexing those muscles of mutual aid and support and being in community with other communitie s, then when the shit hits the fan, you're like, ah, here we go. And, so, that was really powerful to see in September.

Carly Berlin: Yeah, absolutely. Well, I feel like we're getting towards the end. I'm trying to think of any culminating questions.

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But, I guess, I want to put it to you, if there are things I haven't asked about that feel important to include to sort of fill in any of these stories you've been telling.

Spirit Paris McIntyre: I think respecting Black leadership, Black thought, Black action, yeah, there's something, just the nuance, the power, the ability of Black people is really powerful.

1:23:57

Carly Berlin: I guess one other thing to sort of finish off, even if you're not directly involved anymore, I'm curious what vision you might have for the future of mutual aid in New Orleans.

Spirit Paris McIntyre: It's really exciting. Like, I'm part of a couple mutual aid groups on Facebook, and so, in some ways, seeing the future and beyond. So, presently, I'm seeing that. . . There's much more spaciousness in mutual aid for people to talk about all the things that are happening for them. Like, I saw someone post about some violence they'd experienced, and it was somewhat domestic but not quite, and they were able to mention it in the group.

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And I saw some people that were being disparaging, and being like, "#Admins, can you get on this and like remove this? This is not what this is here for," and seeing admins do it. So, just feeling like, okay, this space that maybe would not have been thought to be mutual aid, or a space where people are able to discuss things that are happening for them, and getting aid. And I think in the future, I see a future of the people demanding, the people making action, the people taking the necessary actions to be like, "This is our money, and this is what we want to do with it," and really having that agency, that collective agency that's like, "Yo, we have the power to do these things, so let's do these things."

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I don't know that I want to see mutual aid not be needed because it's like, we need each other, but where mutual aid could shift to be like mutual joy or something, where it's like, oh, we are

aiding each other in doing different types of things. We're not aiding each other in like getting a basic need, something that you shouldn't even have to be concerned about, where those needs are met and it's just like, oh, my gosh, I could use— does someone want to go with me to the beach? Or like ,just things that are like, oh, yes, of, or where it's just like a whole different vibe.

1:27:00

Where it's like, oh, who wants to come harvest, or who wants to— where it's so much abundance that the aid, the nature of aid changes. Where it's like, oh, let's come enjoy that. Then we can come go enjoy that, and then we can go be in that, and support with this. I'm excited to see a world like that.

Carly Berlin: That's a great place to end on.

Spirit Paris McIntyre: [laughter] Thanks.

Carly Berlin: I'm going to do one other funky audio thing before I turn the recorder off. I'm gonna capture some sound from the room to give us some background noise to put this together. So, we'll just sit quietly for like 30 seconds, and then we'll be done.

1:28:00

1:28:37

[End]