Episode 1: What is Community Organizing? And Why is it Needed?

Luke Bretherton (LB) [00:00:05] Hi, my name is Luke Bretherton, and this is the Listen, Organize, Act! podcast, which focuses on the history and contemporary practice of organizing in democratic politics and transformational change. The podcast is a collaboration between the Industrial Areas Foundation, Duke Divinity School and the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University. This is the first episode in what is a limited series of conversations with those who do community organizing. The specific focus of the series is to help communicate what community organizing is about. It explores some of its core practices, commitments and values in a way that provides an accessible supplement to on the ground training efforts. The hope is to take advantage of the spoken word format of podcasts to capture something of the oral tradition of community organizing. But running alongside the specific focus are two others: One of which is to explore how organizing connects democratic politics and religion in constructive ways. Since its origins, the majority of institutions involved in community organizing are religious congregations from all faiths. The other is to examine how community organizing embodies a distinctive vision and practice of democratic politics, which is vital to foreground in our contemporary moment, when democracy itself is seen by many as either an implausible way of solving shared problems—ranging from climate change to structural racism—or actively undermined in favor of authoritarian forms of rule. The name of the podcast reflects these concerns, particularly the last one, namely, that community organizing embodies an approach to doing democracy well, through a series of conversations with many different kinds of folk who live and breathe the work of organizing. This series explores how democracy is not first and foremost about a system of government or set of laws or an ideology, but is rooted in three things. The first is a commitment to listen to others different to oneself, because their experience, their story, who they are as a person matters; listening honors fundamental premises of democracy as it marks a way of respecting the dignity of each individual, the importance of dialogue, as against killing and coercion, as a means of resolving conflicts, and that people should have a say in decisions that affect them and in shaping the world they live in. The second is that democracy does not just happen; it needs organizing. And if it's to be democratic, it needs people organizing between themselves to determine their living and working conditions. If ordinary people don't get organized, then they are subject to others acting on them, and their living and working conditions being determined by systems and structures controlled by others who either don't listen to them, don't have their interests at heart, or are actively hostile to them and want them silenced or disenfranchized. And finally, democracy lives or dies by shared action. Listening and organizing generate the means of coming together. But at a certain point, people must act together to move from the world as it is towards becoming a more just and generous one in which all may flourish. Community organizing as a form of democratic politics embodies these three elements. It begins with listening and has a particular set of practices for organizing people and for generating shared action towards common ends. In this first episode, I talk to Keisha Krumm and Mike Gecan about what is community organizing: What does it involve and why does it matter? Keisha and Mike are two very experienced organizers with the Industrial Areas Foundation, one of the leading networks that does community organizing around the world. Keisha recently became lead organizer with Greater Cleveland Congregations, having been an organizer in Milwaukee for a number of years before that. And Mike has been an organizer for over 40 years, written extensively on organizing and done much to shape its contemporary practice. They will each tell me something of their story as we go along. So join me now for this, the first in a series that explores what is community organizing.

LB [00:05:02] So, Mike, Keisha, welcome to the Listen, Organize, Act! podcast. It's great to have you here. A question I start with for folk on this podcast is: Tell me a little bit about kind of where

you grew up and how you came to be involved in community organizing. Keisha, if we start with you.

Keisha Krumm (KK) [00:05:22] Yeah. So, hello, Luke, and thank you for the opportunity. I am Keisha Krumm. I am currently the lead organizer of IAF project in Cleveland called Greater Cleveland Congregations, and I have been organizing with the Industrial Areas Foundation for 20 years. So I was born and raised in Wichita, Kansas, and it was a great town to grow up in. My grandmother moved there from Oklahoma and brought my mother and her siblings. And it was at one time known as the aircraft capital of the world, because there was at least one part of every airplane in the sky was made in Wichita, Kansas. And so it's a manufacturing town. And I grew up in a neighborhood where we were bussed to school. And that experience in public school was bittersweet in the sense that our school system was well funded. And so we had really good sports programs and drama and forensics and art and music—all the things that you think of that you would have in a school system—which gave me an opportunity to find sports through basketball and track. And that was something I really held on to, because the other aspect of our public school system was that as African-American students, we were really forgotten about and it was as if we didn't matter. So, and I never got in trouble because that meant my mom would have had to take off of work and catch the bus and it would have been a lot. So I was a good kid. And the other part of our life was the church I grew up in, New Salem Missionary Baptist Church, which was this institution where my mother and other African-Americans that were working class or living in poverty found agency and found joy. They built that church out of their own money, and they created youth programs. When I was a teen and trying to figure out what I was doing, my mom started a youth group and engaged us. And so I, I'd seen this sense of a world that didn't really want us but needed us and an institution that gave agency and joy, which for me set this foundation of, you know, how do I look for those opportunities in my adult life, which—through all my journeys—I went to seminary, and because my experience in my church and the people that I've seen—people of God—were people that had joy and had agency. And so I thought I wanted to be a pastor and went to seminary and learned about community organizing. And it was really through that experience that I got exposed to the IAF and tried to do some neighborhood organizing that was unsuccessful. But the best thing about it was that I went to IAF training in '99 and I learned about this model and I'd seen people of faith have joy and agency and actually got things done in their community. And I wanted to learn from people that seemed like they really knew what they were doing and producing. And so in '99 I went to training and then I think in 2000—I think it was 2001—I started organizing in Los Angeles.

LB [00:08:55] Right. Right. Right. How fascinating. So, Mike, a little bit of your growing up context and how you got into organizing.

Mike Gecan (MG) [00:09:02] Sure. Thanks, Luke, and good to be with you and Keisha today. Well, I grew up on the west side of Chicago in a neighborhood called West Garfield Park. In Chicago, like in some other cities at the time, people identified their parish, not by neighborhood. So we were in Our Lady of the Angels parish, which became famous and tragic in a terrible school fire there: ninety two children killed, three nuns killed, when I was in the school there. It was a working class, ethnic, blue collar, Italian, Croatian—we're Croatians. My dad's a Croatian immigrant. My mother was conceived in Yugoslavia, born in the US when her mother came over. So I grew up in that kind of setting. My dad was a World War Two veteran, badly wounded in the war, worked a number of different jobs: construction, security guard, various things. My mother worked in the office of a toy company called TootsieToy. And both places where my parents worked you could see from our window for most of our lives. It was that kind of world. Then, beginning in about 1965, when I was

in high school, I was going to a Jesuit Catholic high school in Chicago—St. Ignatius—I got exposed—mostly by accident—to a number of ways that people organized. So, the first way, we were taken by our Jesuit instructors to civil rights actions in Chicago—events. And those were remarkable, incredible, unbelievably violent, unbelievable reaction. When people say, "Have you ever seen it this bad?"—given what happened last week in Washington—I said, up to last Wednesday, I said, "I've seen it worse." And as of last Wednesday, I now say, "I've seen it as bad." So I saw that and experienced it and was deeply moved by it, impressed by it. So that was number one. The second was when our neighborhood was racially panic peddled. And when realtors came out and scared white families out, my mother tried to put together a little civic group to stop the panic peddling and the blockbusting. And then, when the neighborhood totally resegregated and we were the last and only white family, she then, with her African-American neighbors, put together a little association to try to keep the neighborhood in decent shape. So I saw an attempt at civic organizing just by watching my mother and my neighbors. And then the third thing I saw was the Cook County Democratic machine, which beat both: blocked and obstructed and undermined the civil rights movement in Chicago; overwhelmed, destroyed, crushed neighborhood after neighborhood. So I saw that in action. And then the fourth thing—and this was all between 1965 and 1970—I mean, it was just summers in college, I worked with the Contract Buyers League—which Alinsky did not like and didn't think it would work; as it turned out, one of the many times he was wrong, by the way—which was led by African-American homeowners, who who had been forced to buy their homes at contract, and by a Catholic priest named Monsignor Jack Egan, a famous Catholic priest at the time, and a Jesuit seminarian named Jack MacNamara. And so I saw an early version of an attempt at a kind of a power something: part civic, part mixed. So, just kind of by accident and by being taken to things and by seeing my mother and her neighbors and our neighbors, I knew there was something here called organizing. I didn't know it was something you did for a living. I didn't know—but I went—but I knew I had that in my mind. So that, when I graduated college, I did a few other things, in the back of my mind was always, "I wonder if you can do that for work." I mean, "I wonder if that's work for pay so you can survive as well as do it." So eventually I found my way in 1976 to the IAF and worked with them—and worked with the IAF—for all these years. I semi-retired about 20 months ago, which is becoming a lot less "semi" during this period. So that's that's how I found it.

LB [00:14:04] Oh fantastic. Both wonderful, wonderful stories with some kind of overlapping themes. So, you've both been involved in community organizing for many years now. So, Keisha, let me let me ask you, because you must get this question the whole time when you're kind of starting out in a place and or you're just kind of meeting people for the first time—How do you answer this question: What is community organizing?

KK [00:14:31] Yeah, so I would sit in a room of a new pastor that had just came to the city of Milwaukee and we were trying to recruit them into our organization because they were a really established African-American church—actually the oldest in the state. And so she asked me, she's like, "What do you guys do?" And I said, well, I said, "Pastor Joy, I teach people how to fight to create change for the common good." And that's simply what it is. But I think the other part is really about teaching people how to organize power. One of the things that I'd seen in the community I grew up in is while we had agency and joy, we didn't have a lot of power to really shape our own destiny as a community and as a group, and that what I love about this work is that we have the opportunity—if we find the leaders that are committed to relationships and building power—to do that and to get into the kinds of campaigns where we can begin to reshape our communities around the things that we see as important for not just our people, but for the common good and the greater good of where we live.

LB [00:15:43] I have to say that's one of the most pithy and succinct and on point definitions I've ever heard. That's fantastic. Mike, what would you add to that or sketch out of that?

MG [00:15:52] Yeah, I don't use the term "community organizer." I don't say that's what I do. I just say "organizer" or I say "power organizer," because while we obviously organize with through communities, we organize across other kinds of denominations, faith groups, institutions, geographies. So when we began the Nehemiah effort to build the thousands of single family homes in Brooklyn back in 1983—with a young congressman, by the way, named Charles Schumer, who was a supporter then and is now going to be the leader of the Senate, Senate majority leader—we had an organization in the East Brooklyn community, but we knew that wasn't enough. We needed Bishop Francis J. Mugavero. We needed Bishop Robert C. Witcher of the Episcopal Diocese. We needed the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. We needed the eight million dollars they committed and no-interest revolving construction money. We needed the New York Daily News. And we needed a developer named I. D. Robbins. So we had to create a power entity that was in, with, and through the community, but beyond that and complemented that. So I said we do organizing, we do power organizing, and we organize for impact. And the secret is training—identifying, training, and developing leaders and figuring out how to bring them together and sort out differences and agree what we could all tolerate in one another and then identify those things we want to we want to aim at and effect and change. So that's how I define it.

LB [00:17:42] So it's been called over the years various things—from institution-based organizing, community organizing, some refer to faith-based organizing because of the predominance of faith communities, relational organizing—these are all terms. So, for you, the name is less central. It's more this question of how do you bring people together to be able to generate the ability or agency or power, we might say, to affect the conditions they live and work by. And that's going to be for some in some campaigns, I guess, like a living wage, it's about working conditions. Or now IAF's again very involved in union—that's going to be kind of work-based, other contexts going to be more place-based. But it's really this question of how do you bring people together to have agency and, using Keisha's phrase, the kind of joy of discovering your ability to act in the world and act together with others to change, in effect, for the better you're living and working conditions. Would that be a kind of fair sense of what it's about?

MG [00:18:50] Yes. And how do you—you know, there's this term scaling up versus scaling out—how do you scale out the examples of impact that you have in a Cleveland or a Chicago or a New York or a Brooklyn? Because we've had enormous impact in certain areas, in certain places. And then funders and others will say, "Well, you've got to scale it up and you need a bureaucracy and you need a this and a that and a whatever." I said, "No, no, no. You got it wrong. It's not scaling up or scaling out. We need a hundred Nehemiahs in the US; not a couple. We need a hundred health care, statewide health care efforts as we have in Massachusetts, not just one, you know. So, how do you scale out? And how do you—in a way, it's agitating and challenging our own people to say, "Look, we've done something here that's great. Now, how do we replicate it with changes, with modifications, with sensitivity to local conditions in different places in a hundred or two hundred or three hundred or five hundred places?" So, you know, that's what I think about these days.

LB [00:20:11] No, that's a very helpful response. I mean, I think one of the critiques that's often leveled at organizing—right going back to the 60s—is this question of scale. And, first, it used to be called neighborhood organizing and then the neighborhood was the wrong scale, so it had to be at the metro scale. And then, well, you need to move to the regional and then the national. Now, we

have various kind of bonkers academic theorists, like me, saying, "No, you've got to—it's the global scale." And so what's the right—there's always a bigger scale that you're not fulfilling. But that...

MG [00:20:44] Cosmic, cosmic scale! Cosmic economics.

LB [00:20:46] Yeah, that really is my job. I teach divinity. So, you know, that really is—that's a given. We're all operating at that level. Yes. But that sense of your—in your response there, you were saying this problem of what, again, geographers call a scalar imagination, that somehow there's always the right scale to have effective agency—that's the wrong way to look at it. It's about the distribution and replication—rather than finding some magic bullet scale, which will somehow change everything if you just can hit that note.

MG [00:21:22] I think that's right. And, you know, we have some examples of this. When the colleges were being formed in the 1820s and '30s in the Midwest by abolitionists, by religious organizations, by the United Methodists, by others—there's a whole network of Grinnell and Oberlin and Antioch, a whole network of colleges that were open to women at the time, that were abolitionist at the time. But that were also very—they were into STEM. They were into engineering and pragmatic things. There was no hierarchy that said, "Let's do, let's build 50 colleges." But they scaled out in that period. Same thing happened with high schools, public high school in the US. Same thing happened with community colleges. So, how do we do that in organizing? I guess this is a question I have.

KK [00:22:21] Yeah, that resonates as one—that resonates because for me, coming from Milwaukee and really experiencing our work around Milwaukee Rising, which we really learned from Nehemiah Housing, and then we created an insurance company—coming to Cleveland, that helped give me an imagination about what could be possible. So I think it's scaling out, but it's also imagination and then having the ability to take that imagination and turn it into some sense of reality. And then learn from the things that we've done and then figure out how do we make it contextually here, and that works here. But it still has the same flavor—that this was created by the people, because this is what we imagined and dreamed that we need in our community and we have examples that it can be done.

LB [00:23:13] So, I guess that part of the imagination, then, of organizing is it's got to be attentive to the people in a place. And as soon as one gets caught in this imagination of "what's the right—this grand scale," one is then immediately removing the answer and the agency from people so that there's a kind of double whammy.

KK [00:23:34] Absolutely.

LB [00:23:37] Can I ask you what...

MG [00:23:37] That's called franchising. [laughter] And that's not our thing.

LB [00:23:44] Yeah. So that's, "How do you take this kind of identikit appraoch and you can just replicate?"—rather than it grows through deep attention to the people of a place. That's really interesting. So, Keisha, let me ask you, so what do you see as the primary goals of being an organizer of the coalitions you're building? What do you—what, if you're not doing it, would you think your work would lose its heart and soul?

KK [00:24:17] Yeah, I think, when I look at our work, I think it's this concept of "we the people." And so that there is a people and that there's a sense of a "we" and a collective. And, I think, if we lose that sense—that it's just about winning, it's just about the next hot campaign or the next great trend, and that the people become an expense to those things—I think we've lost the soul of what we're doing and that, you know, coming into Cleveland, it's not about what I want to do. It's about what we want to do. And what does Reverend Maxwell want to do? Reverend Quincy? Reverend Colvin? Our strategy team. Yes, I have ideas that come with experience, and I'm a part of a collective that's doing really interesting work. But that has to be something we the people want to do, and then we begin to do that.

LB [00:25:12] So, is part of, then, the work of organizing both the identification of what that "we" is willing to act and act together on, but also the formation and constructing and nourishing of a "we"—the sense that there is a we here who can act together. Is that right?

KK [00:25:30] Yeah, I would agree with that.

LB [00:25:32] And, Mike, there's some sense that often there's a focus on the campaigns—and we can look at Nehemiah house or a living wage or these kinds of issues. My sense is, though, that the campaigns, while vital, are kind of secondary at some level to—going back to what you said earlier—to the identification of leaders, the building up of relations, and in many ways what Keisha said, of the formation of a we in the sense of there being a we—can you just kind of comment and reflect on that a little bit in terms of your experience of doing that?

MG [00:26:08] Yeah, well, it's dynamic. It's not a contradiction or a—I think we do have to win. I want to win. And the people I work with want to win. So the process is important, but impact's important, too. And so, they're not contradictions. But they are in some tension and some dynamic tension. So, it all starts with what we always call organizing—the organizer's job is a talent scout. So whenever I'm out organizing, I'm looking for talent. I'm looking for strong, good, tough, interesting, challenging leaders with followers who can become part of a team over time and relate to one another and figure out what they want to do and go after it. So, partly it's identifying that talent and not rushing that and not—in the early stages, suspending judgment on what I think or anyone thinks might be possible and making sure the team is there, the right team, because, in my experience, with the right team enormous gains are possible. And without it, no matter what your ideas and thoughts and dreams, you're stuck. Way back when I was starting in Chicago—before I was with the IAF—I was with something called the Campaign Against Pollution, which was an environmental group, and a fellow organizer there was a friend. We're out for dinner one night and we're finishing dinner. And I said, "I got to go." He said, "Where are you going?" I said, "Well, I've got three individual meetings with three leaders." He says, "Why are you doing that?" I said, "Well, I thought that's what we were supposed to—I thought that's what organizers did." He said, "No, no, no, no, no. I've got a leader who can speak about the environmental issue. She's really good. So basically, I'm done. And you don't need more than one or two." He became a—he went on to become a very well known progressive campaigner, a political figure. And it just struck me that he had a totally different picture of what organizing is. His idea of organizing was having these ideas—which I thought were good ideas, too—finding a leader from a community who could be the spokesperson, and then just going ahead, instead of broadening and deepening the team and finding all the other things that people felt strongly about and might want to work on. So it's doing that...

LB [00:29:09] Right. So, Keisha, can you comment on—there seems to be this tension, then. You've got to build relationships, and in some ways you can't let the position or the work get ahead of the strength and depth of the relationships. You've got to move to action. There's got to be some action and some change there, as well. And there's a sense in which you've got to build relationships between people who might not otherwise come together or know each other or might be suspicious of each other or even antagonistic to each other. How do you manage those elements? Or there might be other elements, as you see it in your work—but how do you manage those elements, the key elements of the organizing labor?

KK [00:29:56] Yeah, I think it is about relationships. When Mike talked about building the team, it's not about having a team that always agrees with each other, are the same, thinks the same, wants to be the same. That's that's not it. I think it—so, part of it is being able to identify the people that do have the sense of relationality and know that we need each other to—and I agree, I think we do need to win. We don't always win. But, winning in our work is healing. It is a healing part of being when you're in a community where you're constantly getting your teeth kicked in or the knee on your neck, winning is a part of healing. And so I think that the way we've dealt with it is that you've got to confront people. So the sense of—that we name it, that we're not passive aggressive with each other, that when we say things that might upset us or that we call each other out on that and that we—that the relationships are there because we know we have the same goal in mind, that if we want to make our community better, we need each other to do that. And and the people that are not interested in that are really not attracted to our kind of work. They don't stay. They come for an issue or the thing they want to do. And then when it's done, they move on. The people that are—they're with these organizations longer than the organizer is, because the organization is their organization and they know that it's their business to be growing, finding new leaders, engaging people in this work. And so, I think it's the constant struggle of the work and it's also an appreciation of that.

LB [00:31:52] So, we're in this time—there's quite a moment of political ferment, particularly these past four years of Trump's presidency. And there's a lot of—a whole range of responses to that politically. Some people on the street, some people doing policy, trying to reimagine policy approaches. You know, we could go on and on about the different kinds of responses, the different visions of change. How does organizing compare and contrast to other visions and approaches to democratic politics?

KK [00:32:28] Yeah, I think—so, one of the things about—if you look at the Black Lives Matter protests that happened in 2020 and that kind of protest, people compare that to 1968, that then led to the Voting Rights Act—that kind of protest does play a role in our civic, democratic world, because there is real outrage and disgust of the oppression and the injustice, particularly the killing of black bodies and—or, in the civil rights, the oppression of black people to be able to move and buy and work. And so that outrage is necessary and useful. The question then becomes: What after that? And the people that go to those protests and, like, "This was a great experience. Now what?" Or, "I'm so angry. Now what?" I think that our work is a space for that—the "now what"— because we do build these organizations to last and to take that hot anger that you experience in a protest and turn it into co-anger that is focused on relationships and building power so we can get wins and that we can make that progress that we need to make. And so that's what I say, "Go do it, experience it. And if it's not enough, or if you're looking for something more, we're here." And then, for us, that that becomes creating that space to think about, "OK, yeah, you can do relational meetings over Zoom." That was a huge epiphany for us. And I could tell you, if I would have had a young organizer come to me and say, "OK, I'm going to do all my

individual meetings on Zoom," I'm like, "Well, you're not going to work with us." [laughter] But now, you know, in this world of Covid, I've done relational meetings on Zoom and I actually see that you can build relationships. And so, I think there's that sense for us to be open to the digital world, this digital realm, and kids that grow up in this space, and be able to complement those kinds of experiences with the real relationships, the sense of doing power analysis, doing the strategy, having those meetings, learning how to mix it up with power people and engage and move and push. So that's what I would say.

LB [00:35:05] So that leads into—there's been a lot of talk around—and often there's a distinction made between organizing and mobilizing. And in recent years—the past decade or so—we've seen very powerful protest movements emerge where there's the Arab Spring or the earlier iteration of Black Lives Matter, and the way social media can enable people to quickly find each other and be mobilized. And then that's often contrasted with organizing. We can think back to the first presidential election campaign of Barack Obama, who many would say combined this online mobilizing space and on the ground organizing very effectively in his campaign to bring together a much broader coalition than historically had been mobilized or brought together for electoral purposes. So, can you comment for me on that distinction between mobilizing and organizing, whether it's in an online space or more broadly? And—in organizing terms—it's often framed quite negatively: Organizing is the good thing; mobilizing is the bad thing. I think it's a less clear-cut thing today. But I'd be interested to hear your reflections on that distinction, why it matters, and what's at stake in it.

KK [00:36:19] Yeah. So, when I came to GCC, GCC has—Greater Cleveland Congregations—a really strong mobilizing culture. It was able to mobilize the organization and the city to pass a levy for the school district, when it hadn't done that in ten years. It was a part of a coalition to get Medicaid. So, in our organizing, we do do mobilizing. It plays a role. And I think when I'd seen the distinction—when I was in Milwaukee and we, Deacon Alex Hardy, we had our 10 year anniversary to launch our new vision. And Deacon Hardy was standing outside and he has this list of ninety seven people that were confirmed to come. And he's standing there and he's checking each one off. And, to me, that was like: organizing was because he had conversations with those people. They committed to coming. And he was looking for them to be there. And then he thanked all of them for coming. And so I think that in this moment, there's opportunity for both. But the organizing work is more specific, more deliberate, and it's, I think it's harder. It's easy to post something on Facebook and hope people come. And now people do. But then the question becomes, "What next?" And if we have the next action, who's going to be there? And how am I going to organize those people to get them there?

LB [00:37:56] Mike, do you want to add some reflections on that distinction?

MG [00:38:01] Sure. Well, and I throw in a third category—service—because I think there are—and I drew a little matrix on this. There are three ways to respond to things. And they're all meaningful and appropriate at different times. So the simple story: If there was a car crash outside our houses right now, and we heard a crash and an incident which stopped this podcast, and we'd go out and if someone was in trouble, we'd help them and provide a service, I think. If it happened three times in a day, we might call our block meeting and get together and have a little demonstration or a press conference and say, "Hey, the city's got to fix the street. It's very dangerous." If it happened, as it did in Brooklyn some years ago, in a hundred different areas in East Brooklyn, then a press conference won't work. A quick gathering won't work. You need to pull together leaders from different areas; do an analysis of of where the incidents happened;

compare the street traffic signals or whatnot to the same signals in wealthy areas; and then go after the city and the state and get it corrected, which we did. So each situation calls for a response that's right for that situation. Long term, sustainable efforts—not only to win, but to but to preserve the win—it's not just—you can get a yes. And if you don't have a power organization, that "yes" goes away. And we've seen that again and again. So to have a long term, sustained, effective change, you need to organize. And I think the other power establishments are very comfortable with service. And I actually think they're comfortable with mobilizing. They they can withstand bad press and large scale demonstrations. They got that covered. They can't withstand organizing in the long term.

LB [00:40:26] I think that's a very good point. And I think the—there is a rather nasty way in which, particularly in the online space, the mobilizing is actually producing coin for the people who own those spaces. And that, I think, is a thing that is—increasingly we're having to reckon with about the outrage machine is being monetized to make...

MG [00:40:55] Remember—and Keisha will remember—during the Arab Spring, we asked three of our organizers to go there and to learn about the effort. And what they learned was, yes, technology had been helpful. But there had been organizing going on among taxi drivers and different work groups for a decade and that organizing had come together in the Arab Spring. That's the one thing. And the other thing they learned was that the opposition began to use technology as effectively as the uprising was using it and undermined the effort with some of the same tools. So, it's a tool; not an end.

LB [00:41:50] I mean, there's a very old argument in organizing-mobilizing debates that goes back to—I think the historical example is the Detroit workers strike in the 1930s or something. This is a very obscure labor history. But the sense in which real change emerges spontaneously—people somehow get together at a moment of crisis and they generate these solutions to themselves. And if you have an organizer or any intentional effort, that somehow dilutes or is an imposition. And there's quite a lot of academic talk about that. And there's this ideal the real change emerges spontaneously without organizing efforts. How do you—I mean, I think it's baloney, personally. I just think the evidence—empirical evidence is there's always organizing efforts that have been going on, even if they're very informal and the building of a relational power base. But I know, Mike, you've had that—you must have had that thrown at you a lot. How do you respond to that kind of critique or comment?

MG [00:43:04] It's mythology. It's not history. It's the mythology of Rosa Parks, that she was a wonderful woman who finally got fed up and decided to sit where she wanted to sit. And it completely erases her training at the Highlander Center and the fact that she tried the same tactics several times before she got the reaction that got the attention that they were seeking. It's just mythology. And maybe an aversion to the work—what Keisha referred to, the work side of this. This is work. That's not a negative. But it's a reality that hobbyists, as Eitan Hersh has described people, they don't want to work. They want to pop in and pop out at their leisure. That's not what—that's not how change happens. It's good work, but it's work.

LB [00:44:11] So, I mean, that connection to the civil rights movement...

KK [00:44:14] So, Luke, I just wanted to add to that. I think that mythology benefits the dominant culture—to say that if you can mythologize it, then you can dismiss the real existential threat that organizing is to the status quo. At the end of the day, I think, when I look at what our organizations

do is we are this existential threat to the status quo. And so it works to say Rosa Parks was just fed up. But what doesn't work is that it was all of these African-Americans and their relationships that organized their money. Because actually, when you look at the boycott and the money that was lost from the city—and they took that power and changed it. That's a real threat.

LB [00:45:03] And, I think that, crucially there, they took what was to hand. And that's part of organizing work—they could organize their money. They had some they had cars. They had institutions—the church—to make connections. And so the organizing work is—I love the—I know Ernie Cortés sometimes uses the parable of the feeding of the five thousand and does a reinterpretation of it. But that sense that that transformative event emerged out of people taking what was to hand and it becoming more because it was amplified and increased by people doing it together. And I think the Montgomery bus boycott is a wonderful—just a very powerful example of that. So, Mike, can I ask you, where does organizing come from? What are some of the streams, rivers, traditions of political work, of forms of life that feed into the development of this thing we've been talking about as organizing work?

MG [00:46:05] Well, let me tell you that with a—respond to that with a specific—and similar maybe to Keisha's, and it relates to your last question, Luke, about the connection between mobilizing and organizing. Over thirty years ago, a young fellow—we found a young fellow in New York named Dave Fleischer, and he was working for Ruth Messinger, who was a borough president. He was a partisan political person, publicly gay. And I can't remember how we met initially, but we met—we did several individual meetings. And I said, "Why don't you come work for us? And we're nonpartisan. So it's not for partisan work. But why don't you come and teach our leaders in New York how to do voter turnout in local elections?" So Dave worked for us for three years and taught us voter mobilization and then went on to Ohio ten, twelve years ago and worked with our groups with an effort there. Then Dave, after a couple of years, said, "You know, I really love this and I love the IAF and the leaders I'm working with, but I want to work on gay and lesbian issues." And so he went and did that. And he took what he learned from organizing and applied it to how to engage people and deep—what's called deep canvasing now, which is now widely recognized as highly important work—and he helped turn around all of the counter—all the attacks on gay and lesbian policies and people. Remember, fifteen years ago, the gay and lesbian community was in retreat, was being beaten time and again in local elections and referenda. Dave and his team reversed that, turned that around and turned it into a long list of victories. So it's another way that Dave is an organizer. And I considered him part of an extended Industrial Areas Foundation team and a close colleague and close friend who probably would say "I do more mobilizing than organizing, but they're very interconnected and they feed one another." He's fed us and I think we've fed him. So I think that's the way it works, at times—at its best, actually.

LB [00:48:37] That's really helpful, and another great example. And I think that the deep canvasing process is incredibly important at this time of polarization. So just going back to that, what I was saying about the history, what do you as the different strands feeding into this? Can you narrate for us a little bit about how would you tell something of that history, or story?

MG [00:48:56] Well, in our history, as you know, John L. Lewis was the mentor to Saul Alinsky. So one of the deepest early streams was organized labor and its history. The Back of the Yards, the first IAF organization, was an organization of congregations and labor unions and civic groups and community groups. So there was a civic stream; there was a labor stream; there was a religious stream; and operating in pretty much equal parts for a long time. The civil rights movement was part of that, a big part of it. Civil rights leaders were part of the IAF board at early stages. Ed

Chambers, who passed away as the former executive director, was at the founding event of the Birmingham Association in the '50s, not as an organizer, but as an observer and an interested person. So all the Mexican-American farmworkers movement and community service organizations were part of the early formation of the IAF: Fred Ross Sr. and Cesar Chavez were on the IAF payroll in the early days, for a while. So all of those movements, ethnic and racial developments and entities kind of fed into the IAF. Around the '70s and '80s, labor and IAF went separate ways, not in opposition and not in hostility, just out of drift. And then in the late '90s and 2000s, we brought it back together again through the living wage campaign and the Amalgamated Transit Union work and the work with the education associations and others. So there have been phases of IAF's history, but all informed by those early groups, those early leaders and those early lessons.

LB [00:51:07] So, one of the things—and it's been a thread through our conversation today—is the role of religious institutions and religious leaders, who've been key in both of your lives and then the backdrop to your own getting involved in organizing. Why do you think organizing and religious institutions have found each other? What's going on there? Why do you think religious institutions have—they're not exclusive to organizing, and we've talked about other kinds of institutions that get involved—but they have been a backbone and provided a ballast over decades in all the organizations. Can both of you talk to, and if I begin with you, Keisha, why do you think religious institutions have been particularly important to organizing and continue to be?

KK [00:52:00] Well, I think that we bring out the best in each other—from a sense of—with congregations, a lot of our organizers come out of institutions, and there's generations of organizers now that are coming into this that don't come out of institutions. And so I think that sense of the Imago Dei, that we're made in the image of God and that it's the growth and development of people that is our sacred work, and also the sense that for us to multiply ourselves and so that we need to grow and develop. And so I think that religion—religious institutions—has helped shape that piece. And then the organizing, I think, helps to animate that sense around justice—if this value of justice—how do you, then, really do that in this world and experience what that means? And what does it mean to experience injustice? To then challenge that, to create change?

LB [00:53:04] So, Mike, what would be some of your reflections on that question about the importance of religious institutions to organizing?

MG [00:53:10] I guess I take one step maybe a little further back. I think all really vital institutions do three things. I think they offer places for people to relate. I think they offer places for people to learn. And then they offer places where people can act effectively and with impact. And I think that—the overlapping elements of quality organizing and religious institutions—those three activities operate. So, in many of our congregations, our ministers and our top lay leaders, they want to relate to more people. I mean, they love their institution and they're committed to it and all that. But, after a while, it can be narrow. In fact, it is narrow, whether it's—no matter what faith, what denomination. So there's this appetite to relate. And talented people really enjoy relating across race and class and faith and geography. So the organizing gives people and congregations that opportunity.

LB [00:54:28] So what, Keisha, just help me understand—what do you think some of the things community organizing is perfectly good at? And what are some of its limits? I don't want to say, "This is the great panacea to all political change." Because it's not. It's a bit of the picture. It's

important not to have a sense of—not to be hubristic about it. So, what do you think are some of the things it's particularly good at? And what do you think are some of its limits, in your experience?

KK [00:54:57] So, I would just say, I am biased and I've been doing this half the amount of time that Mike has—I think I'm in twenty years. He's in forty.

LB [00:55:06] [laughter] A bit more, actually.

KK [00:55:10] Oh, OK, not quite half; almost half. But I think the good part of it is that we build these organizations to last and to be institutions that are generational, like our congregations, like labor unions. So I think that's a good part. I think some of the limitations is this rap that we get of not collaborating with other people, that we go it alone. And I think the other is that sometimes it's too slow—too slow and too deep—it's slow, not very sexy. And so I think organizing in Cleveland has given me a real sense of the need to have allies. And so I would say while there's a pushback that we don't collaborate, I think we're really clear about allies and that we can't do the work that we do on our own. We need other relationships and other people with influence—like the crisis centers that we just won in Cleveland, almost twenty million dollars put to that. That was because of our relationships that we built with the county prosecutor and the judges and the foundations and some of the the local mental health groups. And so I think that we get a bad rap for that. I would say another thing that we're probably bad at is not really celebrating. So when Mike said, "That's important, preserving the win"—we don't do a good job of stopping to really celebrate what we've—to savor the struggle that we went through to get to that point. And the other part is a sense of rest and rejuvenation, because people that are drawn to this work are angry and they're ambitious and they're tireless. And so I think that sense of—what I've appreciated about my colleagues and Metro IAF is the sense of, "When are you taking a vacation?" And a vacation is not just a week; it's three weeks, it's four weeks. It's like, "Are you putting your family first in your schedule?" But that's a constant tension in this work. And I think as we try to attract the next generation to this work—to say "It is work." But there should also be times of rest and rejuvenation and celebration.

LB [00:57:48] I think there's a very deep insight in that—politics is not the whole of life and it has limits. And that biblical call of Sabbath rest places a limit on work. There's only so—there's not only so much you can achieve—but there is a proper end to doing the work and there are other things to be done. And I think that's a very important check on all—because one of our problems at the moment is that politics invades everything, and everything gets sucked into the more of politics. And that itself is a quite a dehumanizing process, I think. So, Mike, what would you see—some of the things it's really good at, but also some of its limits?

MG [00:58:32] Well, I'll start with a limit. I agree with Keisha: pace—the limit is pace. Can we can we go faster, scale out more, be in more places, properly replicate in more places? And that's a function of recruiting organizers, which I think has been episodic and not as aggressive as it needs to be. When I started organizing way, way back, we knew from day one that we had to recruit other organizers, that there was nobody else. There were no senior people. There were nobody. You had to do it. And then we did it. And then that became habit. I think that's not—that's got to be reignited in the next generation of organizers. They've got to be recruiting all the time. So I think it's pace, and I think it's related to the level of intensity that is applied to recruiting good, strong organizers and getting them out in the field and letting them make their mistakes. And

then, as we talked about earlier, organizing is capable of securing major improvements and protecting them and preserving them.

LB [00:59:58] I want to—just some final reflections on what do you think are the biggest threats and opportunities to organizing? Not just in the immediate moment, as we change governments, but but in the five year window? As you look ahead, what do you think are some of the key threats and opportunities to the kind of work that you both committed yourself to?

KK [01:00:24] I think our biggest threat is to attract and retain—attract, train, and retain organizers, particularly younger, particularly people of color—also white, Jewish, whatever. But that next generation, the people that are coming behind me. As I think about this, that becomes a huge part of my work of raising the money. I got into this—I was able to—Ernie Cortés was trying out fourteen organizers in L.A. It was kind of nuts and crazy. But he organized the money to do that. And there's five of us that came out of that that are still in this organizing twenty years later. And so I think that is on us to attract and retain. So, the work that Mike has done and—but there's other places like that—that we have to do that. But we also have to raise the money to pay those people well so they could take care of their families. I think the opportunities, honestly, are limitless, because we're in this moment of the breaking down of so many institutions of work, of family, of community, a global pandemic. And when you look in history, some of the greatest things that shifted in organizing came out of these moments of things being unearthed. And who are the people that step into those chasms to recast a vision and a focus and to really build? And so I'm ecstatic that I'm in my forties in this moment, in this organization with the relationships we have, and clear about what our threats are, but then also really clear about what opportunities are. I think the other challenge, or threat, is that a lot of our work has been in institutions—faith institutions—and we know that they're declining across the board. And so the sense of, how are we looking at other institutions or even people that are not a part of the kind of traditional institution that I was? And engaging them in this work and attracting them?

LB [01:02:41] Leo Penta, who organized in Berlin—he had—I love the fact that he set up an institution for people who won't join institutions.

MG [01:02:51] Right. [laughter]

KK [01:02:52] Yes.

LB [01:02:57] I think there's going to be increasingly the institution for people who are like, "I don't want to be part of an institution." "Well, OK, here's an institution for you."

MG [01:03:02] I was there when we did that. We did that. We had a famous meeting at a pub where we met with these young people and they wanted to be part of the organization, but they want to be part of an institution. I said, "Well, why don't you call yourself the anti-institution institution?" And so they got really quiet and one guy said, "But then we'd be an institution." [laughter] So they joined.

LB [01:03:29] I've always loved that story. It brilliantly speaks to where so many people are at—but then it attracted them to the work. So I just want to close and thank you so much, Mike and Keisha, for talking with me today here on the Listen, Organize, Act! podcast. And it's been a very, very rich conversation. I think we've opened out many aspects of organizing, which the

subsequent series will explore in different—in taking up different elements of what we talked through today. So, thank you again and really, really great to be with you.

MG [01:04:02] Thank you, Luke. And thank you, Keisha. Good to see you both.

KK [01:04:05] Thank you, Mike. And thank you, Luke.

MG [01:04:06] Take care.

LB [01:04:15] Thank you for joining me for this episode of the Listen, Organize, Act! podcast, in which I explored the question, what is community organizing? I hope you join me next time as I continue this journey through the different elements of community organizing and how it embodies a distinctive vision of democratic politics.