

Interviewee: Denise Cooper
Affiliation: Basement Nation/Brown Collective
Interviewer: Steve Pfaff
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SP It's 12:40, this is Steve Pfaff speaking, and I'm having an interview today with Denise Cooper here at the University of Washington. Denise, could you tell us something about yourself?

DC Well, I've been at the University of Washington since I was 17.

SP How old are you now?

DC Twenty-one. So I moved here when I graduated from high school from Anchorage, Alaska.

SP Are you a senior now?

DC Yeah, but I won't graduate until next year, because I am a double major in ethnic studies and math, so I'm going to take that extra year for the math degree.

SP Good for you, that's impressive.

DC I started out as an engineering major, but that's another story. Actually, it probably has something to do with why I'm involved with all this political stuff now. If I could say how I got into politics, political activism . . .

SP That would be great.

DC People fail to recognize that it's usually something that develops over time. It's not just something like you get this calling, and all of a sudden you're Angela Davis or something. What happened was, my mom is from Hilton Head, South Carolina, and my dad is from Savannah, Georgia. And he was in the military, and we moved to Anchorage, Alaska. When they got divorced, he moved back to the South, and my mom stayed in Anchorage. So it was a pretty isolated, alienating experience, in that from the time I was ten, I mean, my whole life pretty much, we moved around a lot. So, I was in several different schools, and I never really had time to lay a basis. But also, the population in Alaska is not that diverse when you move into certain areas.

- SP** Right. It seems like in Alaska, there's a majority of White Americans, then a minority of native Alaskans.
- DC** Yeah, so Black people are there, but, one, they're concentrated in one area, and there are not a lot of us. So it was pretty alienating. When I got here, I definitely surrounded myself with what you would call "the people," or I just limited myself to a select group of people, limited to Black people, with Filipino-Americans, other Asian-Americans, Mexican-Americans, Chicanos.
- SP** So was coming to the university a good experience in this sense? A chance to . . .
- DC** I think it opened me up to other cultures, actually, as opposed to limiting me. Because really I had only known, I mean, I'd known Black culture, I'd known White culture, I'd known native culture by just being around it so much in Anchorage. But coming here really opened my eyes to the different ethnic groups. I went that way for a long time, doing a lot of things within those communities, so there was some political activism in that. I volunteered at the Madison YMCA and worked on I-200 stuff, but no real passion for it. Some people say they get the calling. But last summer, or last spring in March, my landlord sold my house, so my roommate and I -- he sold it, and he only had to give us 30 days of notice before we had to get out. We're students, we don't have cash on hand to just move, you know. So what ended up happening was he sold the house, we just crashed on people's couches until school got out, because we had a month or two of school left. Then after people got tired of us being on their couches, we were kind of like stuck.
- SP** With the rents going up the way they are.
- DC** Yeah, so basically we were homeless until -- so he sold the house in April -- we were homeless until a month before school started up again. So we were homeless in August. It was an interesting experience though. We were couch hopping, and sometimes we were sleeping in a car. I just felt really isolated, alienated. I felt frustrated. I started to see what was really going on here in Seattle. Where before, I felt like I was kind of in this box. And then as I was feeling this, I started to notice other things. That was the summer right before the WTO, and all the newspapers were talking about it, discussing the issue, and I started to look at it. At this point, I had really started to question what was going on here in the United States.
- SP** You mean with the economy, or politics, or . . .
- DC** The economy, the politics, how we're dealing with the people. Like I've always been concerned with the struggle of minority people here in the United States. That didn't change when I got to the UW, or when I was homeless. I was still looking at the condition of Black Americans and other ethnic minori-

ties in this country. So my homelessness seemed to just magnify that. But I also noticed it wasn't just ethnic minorities. The people were being marginalized because of their class, because of their sexuality, and so I was noticing all these *isms* and how they were used to keep people suppressed. All the reading that I had done in the past had just started to click, and I really felt affinity for a lot of other people who expressed these same values.

Elaine Brown, for example, and other members of the Black Panther Party, which are pretty influential, I think, nowadays, in that whole revolutionary idea. So anyway, I'm seeing the WTO stuff in the paper, and I'm starting to relate America's historical abuse of ethnic minorities, or just marginalized people in general, and I started connecting that to the global situation. And I started making a lot of other connections. I started to read headlines and see internationally what was going on. I started to get a real feel for the fact that, one, it looked like America and Europe were becoming these distinct populations in that they were based on this consumer economy that was using the rest of these countries, all of them "Third World," and all of them a form of colonial powers for Europe and the United States. So it really just clicked, that's all I can say.

From there on, I was like, okay, I've got to be here November 30 for this WTO thing. And I mean, I didn't even think about organizing other people around me. It was just something that I had made personally a decision that I wasn't going to be complicit in what we do anymore. I mean, I stopped shopping. It was around this period I stopped shopping at any of the national corporations, the Gap or Walmart. Basically, I just stayed out of downtown Seattle. And then I even switched my diet, because the food . . .

SP You certainly came back to downtown Seattle, right?

DC Oh, yeah. I even started switching my foods, because I realized what was going on, the poisons that were going into it. School started, and I noticed that other people were actually working on this issue, and I was like, okay, I'll join them, this is the No WTO people. And then, through No WTO, I teamed up with a group of marginalized activists who wanted to . . .

SP This was the No to WTO coalition here on campus?

DC Yeah, and through that coalition, I teamed up with a group of marginalized activists here in town who wanted to have a group that reflected them and supported them just a little bit more than the separate groups they were in. And these were people from POCAAN and LELO.

SP What are these groups?

DC POCAAN is the People of Color Against AIDS Network, and LELO [Labor and Employment Law Office] is...I don't know. And People for Fair Trade and People for Social Justice, I believe. We all got together and we started to talk about our experiences of being alienated in our separate organizations, whether it was based on sexuality or color, class, or even our age, because a lot of these organizations are run by older people. So we felt that we couldn't branch out, so we decided to team up for this WTO issue especially, get the word out to marginalized communities especially. And we would also perform like a working group during the WTO. This is the group of people that I got arrested with.

SP Which group was this?

DC They're now known as the Brown Collective, but before it was just a loose working group of all these different marginalized activists.

SP What's the structure of the group? Is it a sort of loosely organized group?

DC At the beginning, it was just a working committee. There was no structure at that point. But now, it's really tightening in. I'm not a core member of it anymore. They're really trying to form such a tight group that membership in and out is more of a collective than it is a political organization.

SP Right. In the month or so leading up to the WTO protest events, starting November 30, how many members would you say this group had?

DC Twelve.

SP Twelve members or so?

DC Twelve -- it's real small.

SP But there was a larger number of people in their sort of social network.

DC Yeah, we all knew a whole bunch of different people. So basically, that's the group that I had the most affinity for during WTO. All of us worked closely together. And probably, I think our influence, because we all got arrested the second day, so our influence just in jail, you could see a definite polarity between, because we all got separated, but we all seemed to maintain our roles separately, and we realized that we were a really good working group, especially for emergency situations like these large protests.

SP As a member of the Brown Collective and being involved with these other groups, you then played a role in the No to WTO coalition as a kind of facilitator?

DC Yes. We tried to drum up more support amongst marginalized communities here on campus, visiting MEChA and trying to get them on board with us, and Cambodian student associations, and BSU. Just trying to drum up as much awareness amongst the people who represent us as possible, because they seemed to be particularly unaware of what was going on.

SP So you were trying to say something like, you may not think this is an issue that pertains to your group, but it actually does, and here's why?

DC Yeah, help them make the connections, exactly.

SP Do you think it was successful? Did a lot of students from these different groups take part?

DC I have to commend MEChA, first of all. They are a pretty political group, especially since things are going on in Mexico right now that are highly political with UNAM students, and with the Zapatistas before that, they're very aware of issues in Latin America. And those issues are directly connected to the WTO, so they were ready to come on board. But I noticed that a lot of other organizations, as they were listening, I think they were failing to realize the connection. And I think sometimes it's difficult to see these connections, because the history is so convoluted, and people really don't know. I mean, I've heard people who have been at the university for four years, and they know the history of Europe, relationship to all these third-world countries, but they still don't believe that the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank are hurting these countries. They still need more information.

SP They think that they're just sort of neutral organizations that are helping them develop economically?

DC Yeah, that's some people. But there are even those people who aren't even aware, on that level where it isn't even important, because they're trying to, and I don't want to disregard these people's personal lives, because sometimes it's hard to be concerned about what's going on in Mexico, when you've got to worry about how you're going to pay for your tuition or even so far as communities outside of this school, how you're possibly going to take care of your child while you go to work or something. You've got concerns about your own life. I did notice that, I mean, you get the positive side, like MEChA really supported us, but a couple of students I noticed that I think they felt alienated, because organizers were only representing one part of society.

SP Which part do you mean?

DC Because most of the organizers for No WTO were predominately white, and I'm sure they came from their own experiences, but to the people looking from

the outside in, it seemed like, this has nothing to do with me. And I've had people say, "I'm only taking this from you because I know you."

SP A lot of these kids, even if they're involved with radical groups, they kind of come from upper middle-class backgrounds often.

DC Yeah.

SP Mostly white kids.

DC They're here already, so that's a certain distinction between somebody else who's not in the university. And it's a definite distinction between, say, an ethnic minority who is in the university, because more often than not, we're probably the first or second generation to go to school, and we still have some connection to marginalized community, if we're not still being marginalized ourselves, which is pretty much the case, unless you change skin color and sexuality, sex. So, yeah, we had problems, but I also think it was a time limitation. I think now, after everything is said and done, more of these connections are being realized. I think the WTO prepared a lot of people.

SP I think it's interesting that you said, because other people we've spoken to, people from DAN and from No to WTO group here on campus, or people from the King County Labor Council, have said that they were frustrated. They felt like they had really made an effort to reach out more to communities of color or to other minority groups, and that there was limited response. They felt there had been limited residents and that they didn't feel like all that many people from those neighborhoods or from those communities actually showed up.

DC And that was some contention, too, because, one, those people need to be out there but, two, I think those other organizations, radical white organizations, fail to realize...

SP Although they don't claim to be white organizations, right? They claim to be . . .

DC They don't claim to be that, but unfortunately their makeup does reflect that, and what I think they fail to realize is that, one, you can't just call it one group and decide that that's going to represent all the marginalized communities and, two, you have to understand what these communities are working on. I've talked to so many people who were saying, I'm not going out there, because I know the police are going to be out there. And these communities deal regularly with the police, and they avoid the police like the plague, because . . .

SP That's an excellent point. No one I have interviewed so far has mentioned that.

DC Different perspectives.

SP So, you're saying that people from certain minority groups or certain neighborhoods would have prior experience with police and be afraid they might be treated differently. So if the police are going to crack someone's head, it's not going to be the middle class White kid, it's going to be one of them.

DC Exactly, so I understood perfectly why that many people of color did not come out. But a lot of people did, and that's the thing we need to acknowledge. I mean, from different countries, from here in Seattle, so I think, from what they've been put under and what they have to deal with, I think they responded to the situation appropriately. Now in the wake of WTO, I think that these other organizations, such as DAN and other organizations like them, have to come into these communities with their issues, and they can't come with outside issues. That's the way to get these people on board.

SP So you don't just show up once and say, we need you for this protest, and then next time we need you, we'll see you again, maybe.

DC Yeah. What I'm seeing in these communities is that they want an African heritage museum built out of the Coleman school. They want accountability for police brutality. Now these are issues that other organizations have to look at and say, how can I connect this to my issue? Take the brunt of tearing down this system away from the bottom people and put it on those people who have to share less burden. The bottom people having to inform the top people is a tradition in our society that I think needs to stop, and it should come from both sides.

SP Interesting, although it might always be true, that's to say that most of the political innovation, most of the moments in which civil rights have been expanded, whether it's civil rights for people of color or civil rights for workers, in the early labor movement and so on, it's rarely been the case, historically, that the top has really helped the bottom without being first kind of forced to by mobilization.

DC Well, what I see now with this WTO is that even the top, for as much privilege we say the top has, they're still very unhappy people. In the United States, we're seeing some drastic increases in depression and just people who are feeling stressed out -- they're working more than any other industrial nation in the world. See, for all the things that we gain from capitalism, our consumer service economy, we lose that in the fact that we have less time with our children, our families, personal relationships, and you see a direct

reflection. I don't think very many people in this country are honestly, truly happy. And that's the level that you get some of these people on board is that even though you have all this stuff from the Gap and Old Navy, Banana Republic, you have . . .

SP

Don't forget the SUV.

DC

Yeah, the SUV, the perfect home. Are you happy? When's the last time you talked to your children? Are you sure that they're okay? I think the country is worried about a lot of things. It's coming out in the fact that kids are going to school with guns. People are worried about that, and it's a direct connection to all of this stuff. And it's funny how the media, when they talk about protesters, specifically toward the WTO, and now toward the IMF and the World Bank, they describe us as, they're all gathering loosely under the term called "globalization," but what they don't understand is that globalization is the key that we've been waiting for for thousands of years since human civilization began, because globalization is the connection between all those *isms*, all those different oppressions that everybody's suffering. We're going to take them and combine them under one issue, so you've got so much broad support from the labor community, environmentalists, women's rights, human rights, civil rights, everywhere, people can jump on board.

SP

You really did a good job of answering my question, why did your group or the groups you are involved with target the WTO. What you seem to be saying is that WTO was a kind of point of crystallization or a point where a variety of issues came into focus at once.

DC

Yeah. That is definitely the case.

SP

Was that exciting to you and others, do you think?

DC

I really realized how connecting it was when I saw all those people on N30. I mean, before, and I want to say before it turned violent, it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen in my life. And even after it turned violent, it was still beautiful in the way that we all, hundreds of thousands of people, banded together for this one issue. And we all held one thing in our hearts, and that was the WTO had to go. And then the next day when all those people got arrested and they had us in the jails, I really realized how many separate issues I was dealing with here.

I had one lady tell me she had worked on animal rights for 15 years, but she never thought about environmental rights or human rights, or anything like that. We started comparing our issues, like, what are you working on? Well I'm doing this. Oh, well I'm doing this. But you know what, we're really doing the same thing. So now I can call on environmentalists, Anarchists, labor people. A lot of the Kaiser people, who are now shut down, are so on

board with the anti-globalization movement. You hate to see how human beings have to come together under persecution or whatever. But it took a lot of tear gas and a lot of police brutality for us to all realize that we're fighting for the same thing.

SP

I have a question for you. The groups that you are describing that you mostly were involved with were kind of community-based, smaller scale, not highly hierarchical, right? I mean, these are not groups with a president and this formalized leadership structure. Very grassroots, very community-based and through networks of friends, networks of people who have prior ties to activism and so on. I'm wondering if there was a tension between people who came to this anti-WTO or anti-globalization movement through those kind of channels versus those who came through the more mainstream, highly organized, hierarchical movement organizations, like the AFL-CIO or Sierra Club, or Citizens for Fair Trade, Public Citizen, Nader's group. What was your experience with that? What do you think?

DC

The more radical organizations always seem to have, I don't want to say issues or problems with the more mainstream organizations, in that we're always afraid that at the last minute, they're going to back out if things get a little bit too heavy. Like during WTO, for example, we had 40,000 people in the steel laborers march coming from the Memorial Stadium to the Seattle Center, and at the last minute, when the police told them to turn around, they turned around. And we could have used all of those people, just more support against what the police were trying to do to us. So that upset us a little bit that they pulled out at the last minute. And I can understand...

SP

Although some crossed the line.

DC

Some did, and I was very grateful to those people. I think the leaders of these organizations are very conservative in that they have a wide constituency, and they still answer, to a large part, to our political system. So they can't do as much as, say, a small group, like me, who really the only people we have to answer to is ourselves and maybe an employer or something, and even in that case, not really. But for the most part though, I do commend a lot of the labor unions, because the members started to realize that this is more serious than they thought. And they started to see us get teargassed, and they themselves got teargassed and mistreated by the police. I think they really had to evaluate their stand on the issues.

SP

One of the things that amazed me was to see mainstream organizations like AFL-CIO actually getting involved and listening to what young people had to say, what environmentalists had to say, what people of color had to say. Even a few years ago, it seems like that would have been unimaginable. And it wasn't all patting each other on the back, some of it was real criticism.

- DC** Yeah, and I think, again, that's because this issue is opening up dialogue, simply because it affects so many different people.
- SP** The globalization issue.
- DC** Yes. The labor unions are here, because their jobs are getting sent overseas, and their jobs are getting sent overseas to these poor and deplorable conditions of humanity and conditions of environment. So that brings in so many different groups right there. So I think no matter what the past problems have been with any of these groups, we have to sit at the table with that common realization that this is hurting all of us, so what are we going to do about that.
- SP** I've got an idea of which groups you're affiliated with and why those groups targeted the WTO in Seattle. Let me ask this question: The groups you were involved in, what was their primary strategy in protesting WTO? What did you hope to accomplish? Why attack the WTO? Why take that on?
- DC** We believed in civil disobedience. We thought that was the only way for effective change. And you've seen that throughout history, with the civil rights movement and before that, I mean, 1800 leading up to the Civil War was a study case in rebellion and civil disobedience. But I think we take a very non-violent, non-confrontational approach. And again, a lot of what we did was played by ear and the fact that we had never been together before. So when it came down to protesting, we realized how much we had an affinity for each other, in that we all operate along the same lines. So basically, it involves resistance, but to the point where your resistance becomes confrontational, you don't do that. But I mean, sitting down, having police carry you, to arrest you, being tear gassed, whatever it takes -- non-violent is very much a core idea.
- SP** So the point of the civil disobedience was to try to shut down the WTO meetings?
- DC** Yes, yes, our point was to shut it down. Some people were coming out so that the WTO could be reformed.
- SP** Who do you think was in favor of reform?
- DC** It varied with each individual, it was an individual choice.
- SP** Some big organizations were for reform.
- DC** Yes, some big organizations definitely. I can't remember now, and I wouldn't want to put that on anybody. But I know my group in particular and several people in the coalition here at the University of Washington, we were just tired with the system in general. And we felt the WTO was connected to the

World Bank and IMF and just loosely European, U.S., and some Asian imperialism on these poorer countries. So we would just like to see a complete tearing down of the whole system. When we saw how it was connected to other issues, like the prison industrial complex, for example, in this country, basically we were asking, by shutting down the WTO, we wanted it taken out of existence and we want these other organizations to go along with it and just start all over again.

SP So the aim is to try to knock down the WTO to end it as an organization. And sort of non-violent disruption, you think, is the best tactic to use in shutting it down?

DC I think, in this day and age, you have to really evaluate how you're going to protest the state, because definitely I think non-violence will help you when people look in on your movement. If they see one particular group being oppressed more than another group, they are automatically going to feel sympathy for that group. And you've got to learn your lesson from past movements. The movements that have been violent usually get turned around in the eyes of the media. Especially this new media here in the United States - it's all corporate run. So if we had been violent in any way, they're just going to turn that around and justify what the police had done to us. And you saw that during the WTO. I don't even know how many looters there were, but it wasn't . . .

SP A couple hundred at most.

DC Yeah, and there were so many people out there. But there you go, that was the primary reason given for that police response was there were looters and we were violent.

SP This is the crack-down starting on the 30th?

DC Yes, and it started even before the 30th with arrests, and I know people were gassed earlier that morning, prior to the stuff. So non-violence in the face of violence really seems to get people at least willing to hear your side of the story, if you're willing to demonstrate like that. We saw it happen during the civil rights movement with SNCC and MLK and before him Gandhi, and these tactics work really well. But I'm also at a point where I think your resistance should be proportional to what you yourself can do without violating your own personal freedom, personal ideology. So I can't say that I'm against other strategies, because...

SP So you wouldn't condemn violence?

DC No, I don't condemn violence, because I think there are certain areas where you have, I mean, there are people in the hills of the Philippines right now

fighting a war against the national army, and I think that when your people are being brutalized, you can't just stand there and let that happen. The same thing that's happening in Mexico. Some of these students are being raped, killed. And these students, I commend them, because they're still non-violent. But there's a point, and you know, I haven't drawn the line yet. I know right now, for me, non-violence is the way to go. But it might change as I get older, and it might not. But I do understand and recognize that there are other forms of resistance.

SP I think that the examples you gave of where violence was appropriate were countries that don't have strong constitutional protection of human rights, where the government is completely non-democratic,

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SP not a democracy and a pretty real constitutional defense of human rights.

DC Right.

SP Do you think that violent resistance would be justifiable here?

DC Again, you have to take it organization by organization. The United States, when it's a public issue, they usually treat it as the public is going to force them to do it. But when nobody's looking, they commit atrocities. We see it in the Waco evidence that's coming out that they may have acted inappropriately, the MOVE organization in Philadelphia. There's no contending that they basically eliminated a whole compound of people. Situations like that make me really question how much non-violent demonstration is really effective when you're being faced with such brutal odds. They're using the police as a buffer between us and them.

SP Who's the them?

DC Okay, well, the buffer for now, in the case of WTO and IMF/World Bank, these are just officials trying to go to their meetings and conduct their business. But these officials represent countries. I suppose you could say us being protesters, and them being the bureaucracy and state of different nations. But the police, in their jobs, are trained to deal with people in such brutal, military ways, instead of, they haven't been trained in non-violent tactics. We're still dealing with people who protest in our 1950s Bull Connor method. It's just that we're not using dogs and hoses anymore, but that tear gas is so dangerous, and people don't understand the chemicals that are coming out of that. And they really think that it's, I don't know, humane or something to spray people in the face with this chemical that hasn't been fully tested yet and is known to cause health problems.

So what I'm saying is the way police are trained in this country is a very brutal, military style. And I think when you're dealing with protesters, you have to take a different approach. When you're dealing with most people who come in contact with police officers, you have to take a different approach, because there's a difference between property crime and a violent offense, and we need to defend that too.

SP

There's been a movement here in Seattle for greater accountability to the police around issues of police brutality. But that campaign, it seems to me, was pretty much limited to minority communities. They were the ones making this claim, they were the ones trying to fight for a civilian review board here in Seattle. But really, I didn't see too much progress on the issue. Do you think now, after the WTO protest, where a much broader section of the population, cutting across class and ethnic and racial lines, directly encountered, or at least indirectly through what they saw on TV, police brutality or police misconduct, do you think that that's going to help? Will people remember that lesson, or will they just forget it and move on?

DC

I can't say what people are going to do. It's a different era now. I really must say that first of all, I feel that people are more aware of what's going on. They're more aware of these issues, and they're more concerned about it. Now, is that going to change? I don't really know. I do know that police brutality before the WTO was a minority issue, and now, after the WTO, unfortunately, because it was so many white people who were being mistreated by the police, now it's an issue for everybody. And so, that's a good thing though. It's unfortunate that the way to accomplish those things, we have to go through this long, drawn-out process where everybody gets on the same page. But now, I think, when a minority community makes claims of police brutality, I don't think other communities can just turn a blind eye, especially in the wake of that N-30 event.

But, I also must say that already steps are being made to erase N30 from people's minds. That was a very different period for Seattle, and it was a very hectic period. I think people forget. Because, one, the media really shapes how people are going to think about an issue. They use terms like "last year" to refer to the WTO. That was less than six months ago. And they were using the term "last year" in February. They really make it seem like it happened such a long time ago. Another thing is that they say all those nasty protesters have left Seattle, and so they really make it seem like all these people descended on Seattle and nothing's going on here.

But Seattle is changing, and I think it's dividing along lines of people who see Seattle as this future Mecca of technology and advanced modern era. And I see a different section of people. There are those people whose median income in Seattle is like \$80,000, and then the other people whose median income is under \$28,000. So that's a really sharp division. In the next 20

years, I don't know if people are going to remember police accountability or not, because Seattle is going toward a very different direction.

SP Yeah. I think that's one side of the WTO events. I think you're right. Very few people have discussed that it was kind of a watershed moment in the history of Seattle. And in part, not just because the WTO came here, and the mayor and the police did such a bad job of handling the whole situation, which made a lot of people think, gee, maybe we don't have the best political leadership here in this area. Even conservative people were thinking that.

DC Yeah.

SP But also because it marked a moment in which Seattle, which had a reputation as a very tolerant, easy-going, nice place to live and so on, it was becoming clear for, like you say, those people at the bottom end of the income distribution, it was becoming clear like, wait, these people can't survive here anymore.

DC Yeah. And I mean, the fact that we're the eighth worst state in feeding the poor or just the fact that our homeless rate is increasing with each day. Seattle's becoming an interesting city, to say the least. And I think it is following in that same pattern as, I mean, of course it's quite unique to Seattle, but I mean the same pattern of urbanization that you see in L.A. and New York, where there's a drastic difference between the wealthy and the poor. Definitely see it encroaching.

SP Yeah. That's fairly new for Seattle.

DC Fairly new, especially when you consider 20 years ago there was a billboard asking the last person to turn out the light. And just three years ago, when I came here, Seattle was very different from what it is now. It was just in the beginning of that new money.

SP The dot-com fortunes.

DC Yeah. It was still holding fast to that old tradition of this is a local community, pretty much everybody knows each other, it's pretty congenial. But that's going out the window when people are starving and mistreated by the police and . . .

SP Can't find a place to live.

DC Yeah.

SP Let's see. One thing, we've talked about this a little bit, but I'll ask you, did your group work in coalition with other groups and organizations? Then if

you could say something about the strengths and weaknesses of that coalition that you built around the WTO.

DC

I think what happened was like people developed a new way of working within these groups, like we got smaller, we started to concentrate among people that we knew we could work with for those core meetings, those weekly meetings where you're really accomplishing something with a group of people. But those contacts that were established before WTO and during WTO still remain strong to this day. In fact, I just got an e-mail from one of the women I was in jail with. I don't even know this lady's last name, but I do know that I'm going to see her in D.C. for a IMF/World Bank conference. So we're still keeping these connections, however small and minute, just keeping that communication open, I see, is what's going on.

For example, I work with another organization, too, and it's more of an activism through arts organization. It's not necessarily everybody in the organization is political, but it's called Basement Nation. So we are kind of like a meeting ground for all these different people, DAN, Brown Collective, just regular people in the community to come, and it's poetry, it's hip hop, it's giving people information about what's going on in this world, but from a viewpoint of these artists. So it's pretty amazing. In Basement Nation there are people who I work with politically, closely and, therefore, I maintain that connection through Basement Nation so to speak, but we all do maintain a connection.

SP

What are some of the weaknesses of the sort of coalition that was built up against the WTO?

DC

I think one was when the time came down to really know crunch details, I felt that we weren't as prepared as we thought. I thought we did a good job for working under fire, but there were some things that should have just been known. But WTO really prepared me for future protests. Important information, just like the people you're in the group with, their next of kin, or their blood type or something, just like solid communication skills. What are we going to do if we do get arrested. Are we going to give our name, or not give our name. Just so you know the people all around you who you're working with. I think we didn't prepare people for that jail situation very well. Some people saw it happening.

SP

Like DAN, I think, did some preparation work.

DC

Yeah, they did. But I think, for one, at the university, I'm surprised, I'm really glad that it came off as well as it did, because I don't think we did a good job of preparing students for what could have happened here. That's not a criticism, that's just something for the next time. If we do have this large of a

march, just in case things do go wrong, let's let people know a little bit more about the teargas tactics, let them know about your jail procedure, and stuff.

SP Especially students.

DC Yeah. As long as you have one person who knows jail procedure and jail solidarity, you get some time to talk to people when you're in jail, or on your way to jail, or whatever. Things have a way of working out.

SP What do you think the most important elements of the mobilizing efforts around this protest were? Things like the degree of organization, media work, communication between groups, networking, things like that.

DC My personal experience would be here on the UW mostly. I commend all the people who worked as pinpoint persons with different committees within the organization. Because they really did an effective job of making sure there was information available to people. And those meetings really, I believe, people couldn't ignore the presence of these people up until WTO. So they did a good job of getting it into people's minds. What is the WTO?

SP Some kind of political education.

DC Yeah. And it starts with political education, because I do think that a lot of these issues, sometimes that's all you really need is just for people to understand exactly what is at stake.

SP Well, what is the WTO. How many people a year ago had any idea there was even such an organization.

DC Exactly. So I think information is the most, because a lot of people are just ignorant of what's going on around them. And then once you get that information sent out to people, it's now another thing to make it like, I think because there are so many young people involved in this movement now, we're really trying to make it fun almost, like this is a celebration. We're trying to take back our streets, our governments, our states, and just re-establish humanity, so this is a cause that people can use their other talents for puppet making, dancing, music. We want to make this something really that's never been done before. Just the costumes, and how people really take it as a celebration, more so than a confrontation.

SP I like that, yeah. It's good where it's celebration rather than confrontation. DAN had those little cards they printed that called people to take part in the "festival of resistance" that kind of captures that.

DC Yeah. I'm all for bringing musical instruments, chants. Let's take it away from that trudging, woeful, we're going to overcome. I mean, if they beat us

or whatever, we can still be glorious in that level where we're drumming and we're dancing. I think that's where a lot of people got their strength from was the fact that we were so colorful. That's really what I can say is very colorful.

SP

Yeah. It's interesting, before the media coverage focused just really on the handful of anarchists and looters. Before that, I think even in the media coverage there was some sense that they were reporting on people dressed as turtles and people with puppets and so on, so that was colorful in two senses: colorful in the sense, like you say, of sort of celebration, but then also in the sense of diversity too.

DC

Oh, yeah.

SP

I think that surprised people.

DC

Oh, yeah, it was definitely diverse. It was a nice experience. I can say that it really opened my eyes to a new shift in the world's existence. Now people are resisting all over the world like that. In Mexico, we had a UNAM student come down and talk about their struggle, and she brought pictures with her. And just all these students, and they were just young like us and out in the streets with these big signs and colorful costumes. And it's like, you know, they're smiling, and we're really trying to say, it's not that serious. We're just asking you to respect us, so everybody can meet on this equal plane. But the officials and the powers that be tend to take it a little bit more seriously than we do.

SP

Right. We talked a little bit about this, but maybe you can say more. What was the degree of cooperation between labor, environmental and grassroots groups around the WTO issue?

DC

It could go as far as money, especially afterward, a lot of the labor groups were really the ones to jump on board in furthering the students' movement and helping us out in the places they know that we lacked, and that was a financial support. But also as small as just attending each other's meetings and coordinating different events with one another. For example, the students and the Steelworkers decided to march together to the Seattle Center.

SP

I didn't know that the students and Steelworkers marched together.

DC

Yeah.

SP

From Red Square here on campus?

DC

No, not from Red Square. We met up at Seattle Center and came down with them. And then now, after the WTO, with the Kaiser walk-out and the Boeing walk-out, we had a lot of student support for those. So, during WTO,

everybody supported each other's meetings and trying to get that information out there. But after that, now we're supporting each other's event. And I've noticed a lot of the Kaiser workers and labor people at different events. These are just people who are interested in what's going on. This really opened their eyes.

SP Very interesting. Do you think it will last?

DC I don't know what's going to happen. This century is going to be amazing, I think, though. And I think that people fail to recognize that these things happen in cycles. It got so tight in the beginning of this century that it had to loosen up. People had to fight back, because it was so tight. And then, from that loosening up during the civil rights movement, it got tight again. And people ignored it, because so many people had gained benefits from it, I think, sometimes.

SP You mean things like lifestyle consumption and income and things like that?

DC Yes. Exactly. Especially here in the United States. Our economy took an upward turn around the 80s, and that turn, I guess, probably just directly effected this downward turn of most of these, because these "Third World" countries that we're trying to help now. So I think it's hard for people to realize just what a bad state, and we're in such a bad state now, environmentally, economically, down to our food supply and our water supply.

I think people fail to realize how much of their food in the grocery stores is genetically engineered or just infested with pesticides, hormones, something that's not good for them. It's like preservatives. Just the simple level like that. Or the fact that most water supplies are just undrinkable to the point where, ten years ago we laughed when Evian sold bottled water. Now I won't drink anything else. So, is it going to last? Well, I think as long as this stuff keeps happening. I mean, the biomass of this planet is quickly going to overturn anything else, so that's going to squeeze us in even, I mean, you're going to start seeing those results even here in the United States.

Economically, we're in a precarious position. A lot of these dot-com companies and just these companies that we're invested in period overplay the stock that's bought on credit. We're a credit society. I hate to see what's going to happen in the future, but I think we're making a lot of mistakes. This consumer attitude is definitely hurting a lot of other societies. I think that those people are going to resist pretty soon too. It's pretty bad. I have some friends who were just in Brazil, and they just couldn't believe what was going on there. And Africa. And I think it's going to continue, because the oppressions are still going to continue, so people are going to resist when it gets tighter.

SP

It's interesting, you suggest, and I think you're right, that big movements tend to happen in cycles. If that's true, then it might be really in everybody's interest to really recognize that and really say, okay, we have an opening right now, but the door doesn't stay open forever. Build on what you've got now. Don't wait.

DC

Yeah. See, the thing is, the movements happen in cycles, and you recognize that in hindsight, but people never recognize the movement when it's happening. The civil rights movements were we can put a name on it now, it was a sporadic decade of events, decades of events. And the beginnings of it, in the 50s, I'm sure people didn't see how it was going to end. So, like WTO, then we're going to see how the IMF/World Bank goes, and it's just going to be a continuation. It's just resistance.

SP

Okay. We went over a lot of these things. Where do you think that activists and members of groups should go from here? What should you do in the wake of WTO, I mean, because, for example, there was some disappointment over the Tacoma events that were planned. There was some disappointment over the anti-Microsoft event that was planned. So where do you go from here?

DC

I think where activists go from here, first, is they need to really work on a community level. You can't change anything on that global scale unless you're working really hard to change on a local level. I think we also need to understand that everybody's issue can't be everybody's issue. Strategically, you have to plan such events so that they don't overlap.

I mean, the Microsoft thing, I know for one thing, I didn't feel comfortable in people of color communities out there simply because it was in Bellevue. They can't get out there half the time. And then two, I knew the police presence would be pretty tight, and it seemed that demonstration wasn't right for some people I knew. But that didn't mean that it couldn't help other people. But we can't take these failed efforts as a sign that, oh, it's all falling apart. We just have to take it a fact that sometimes these energies don't click right, and it takes a lot of planning to get successful events -- a lot of planning and a lot of communication. And no successful resistance ever ran smoothly all the time.

But I do think people still have it, if we still have that commitment to maintaining our local community. And I do still see improvement. I don't think it's ever gone back to just the same old thing, and I think people are really trying to make an effort. But it's difficult, it's very difficult, because this activist community is small. So I think it's going to take awhile before everybody gets on board, especially other citizens who don't consider themselves activists.

SP

I agree. The activist community is pretty small, because what you described is a handful of groups, really, consisting of a handful of people who do a lot of networking and so on, and provide kind of like core points around which protests form. On the other hand, there are these large-scale NGOs that work a different way than you all usually do, but who have a mass membership, a lot of resources, and a lot of long-term staying power. What they don't have is the kind of fire that the grassroots groups have. They don't have that kind of radical fire. They don't have that energy and spirit. So how do you marry those two things together? How do you marry that sense of spirit and drive and real sense of the movement is in the streets? So taking advantage of those things, which can be hard to arrange, because energies wear out, people graduate school, whatever happens, with these organizations that have lots of resources and have lots of continuity, but often lack the fervor.

DC

That's definitely a good point. I think it starts by having events, because as grassroots organizations, we deal issue to issue almost. Every week there's a new issue. And we can tell each other, because we're so small of a community, this is the issue we need you out for. So sometimes I get a day's notice, two day's notice for a protest. And these national organizations can't work like that, because they have such a broad, just committee of bureaucracy or organization. So what we have to do for that is that we have to organize joint events that are planned pretty far ahead. They happen on days where people know that we're going to have action.

I think this A16, N30 type deal, and then after A16 there's going to be an Earth Day event and after that there's going to be May Day, and after that, like those are the big ones that you definitely keep the NGOs on board for. So once you do that, once you get people, you have to disrupt their natural patterns, and then you can get them into a new rhythm. Once you get people going to these different events, expecting them, you have more of a community feeling going on, so people are more ready to respond to an issue later on, if they only get a five-day notice, but they heard about it at least, so they're aware in their mind. A lot of these events are stuff that you want to go to.

Unfortunately, it's just a matter of hearing about them, having the time to really work it into your schedule and stuff. And I understand perfectly that a lot of these NGOs have members who are 9 to 5ers, 40 hours a week, if not more. So it's really a lot to expect of somebody who doesn't have my freedom of schedule to be at a lot of these events. But I do think that those set dates, like N30 and A16 have really helped a lot.

SP

What about a possibility of sort of the two cross-fertilizing themselves through personnel. In other words, the AFL-CIO, for example, or a lot of mainstream environmental and human rights groups, say they want people just

like Denise Cooper to come and work for them. They say we need people like her to work for us. Would you consider doing it?

DC

No. Unfortunately, I have worked in those areas before. I have worked in these organizations that, one, not so radical in thought and, like these non-profits, it's unfortunate, but they've gotten absorbed into like almost that same light as, say, like any office in Washington, D.C. They're really working on this, it's too structured of a level where any, like changes are very difficult to make, if you're one person really making a difference. And it's difficult, for myself, to work in these structures that are based on systems that in the past really haven't worked. And I like working in a group where it's consensual, everything that happens is consensual.

SP

You definitely believe in the consensus style of organization.

DC

Oh, yes. These radical organizations were all more willing to explore different ways of operating, whereas a lot of these NGOs already have their structure in place, and they're really not trying to change. So, I think expecting people who work in radical grassroots to work in that way is the same thing as expecting them to work in corporations. It just doesn't work for them, because they have a different working style.

SP

Interesting.

DC

But I don't think that should stop us from coming together on these issues. Because really the only thing that we need is let us plan, we can still plan these events in your organization or out of your organization. What we need is just the support from your organization in whatever avenue that supports, whether it be people, funds, or just your stamp on a web site saying that you do support what we're doing.

SP

What would you say if, let's say I was a representative of a labor union, and I said to you, Denise, there is a community of color, okay, let's say a town where almost all the people work in a chicken factory. I used to live in North Carolina, so let's take that as an example, all right?

DC

All right.

SP

There are all these women of color working in these chicken plants. I've gone in there and tried to organize these women to union, and they're suspicious of me, right, because they say, this guy's a northerner, he's white, he seems to be a union professional, it makes me nervous, it won't work. What if I said to you, we both agree that these women need better wages. They need better benefits. They need better protection of their human rights as employees. And we both know that if they're in a union that's well run, things will get better for them. Would you do it?

DC

Again, it just depends. You can't deny the benefit of helping out. But again, I also think that unions sometimes have an attitude with communities where they go in and they want to impose their issue on those communities once again. And I would say, why ask me to come and have you examine any of these women? Have you seen any qualities in them that you think - there's always somebody in a group who's charismatic and who can get most of the people in the group to listen to what they say, if not to go along with what they say. So, why can't you use these women themselves? And I can't say wholeheartedly that I would never work for a union. It would depend on what I was doing. And I have to examine each community for itself and see really if that does benefit them, or if they need something else.

SP

Yeah. All right.

DC

But, I don't want to disparage what they do as organizations, because they've done a lot historically, and they still do have a lot of power. But I do know that we have to be open to new ways of approaching things. Because it's really the new ways of doing things that actually make change.

Again, going back to civil rights, especially SNCC, I really think SNCC had a lot to do with a lot of those changes, and those students took it upon themselves to work amongst themselves to create change. I think putting me in an environment where I'm not familiar or comfortable is not going to do you any good. I only work well when I'm working with other people who work well with me. It's all about, I'm really big on personalities and thinking about the individual when I think about these organizations. I don't think you can just be with somebody on an issue and still be able to work with them. That's two different things.

And I think that's another approach to activism that people are really trying to use, because we're learning from mistakes of other organizations in the past who had internal problems. Internal problems are always going to bring you down. I really have to work in an organization that I feel safe in, a safe space for me, I can grow in that organization too. So from what I see of your national organizations, I just don't think there's enough room for me to grow without me feeling structured in, so...

End of Interview

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