

FOLLET: On what grounds? What was their argument?

BEWSEE: Again, I wish I could say it was more ideological. A couple of folks came in who were, like, Got to tighten up this ship and everything's got to be done. And initially, it was, like, really good energy to go on, you know, because we need people willing to pay attention to the structure. But it kind of quickly got fascist, you know. So, for example, if we needed to go buy some supplies, then usually what would happen is you'd go and you'd ask for some money for supplies and then you got a receipt and bring it back and be reimbursed. But now there was a set of people going, No, you've got to spend your own money and then come back and then get reimbursed. And that didn't work for most people because they didn't have the available cash to do it, you know. And things that were, like, Oh, you lost that receipt? Too bad. You don't get paid back.

And so, there was some potentially really valuable stuff, but then other stuff that was, like, Wait a minute, we just can't function this way, you know. That's not the way that we're going to make it possible for people to participate. But as long as it was out there, as long as it was put out there by — you know, it's like, was I holding the organization back? They're like, Well, you say you want people to come with more structure, but now you're resisting the kind of changes that we want to make. You know, and if you got out, you know —

So I came to the conclusion and the organization as a whole came to the conclusion that they were totally off base. And then some of the more personal motivations that people had for why they were asking for this change came out. And so I hung in. But for a while, I did think, OK, you know, maybe it is time for me to go and leave the organization in other people's hands and see what happens. But I wasn't convinced that the organization would really survive, especially under that new leadership. And so I couldn't. And I thought, Well, how much of this is personal because I've been so invested — and of course, a lot of it was because I'd invested so much time. I wasn't going to turn it over to folks that I felt weren't going to do good for it.

On the other hand, I want lots of strong leadership in the organization so that I can say, All right, I'm not going to be the direct organizer, you know, going down to Tent City — you know, I'm not in some administrative little castle there, I'm the hands-on person, but I would like to clear some space to think more about things like developing these curriculum for popular education and some of the — we recently said, Well, we don't have any position papers. You can go back through board minutes and look at what we've decided, but sort of putting together what we really believe and getting it out there. Even though nobody's ever going to buy it unless they work their way up to it — and that's fine, too. You just have it anyway. So I want that.

So that is now, I think, going to be my preoccupation over the next couple of years. But then, a lot of it goes back to money, too, because I

can't expect other people to make the choices that I've made, just for the sake of being able to build and maintain an organization. It's not fair. No one should — I mean, we've never in 20 years provided health insurance for anybody. We've never — in fact right now, we don't even have employees. Everybody's paid as a consultant.

FOLLET: Including you?

BEWSEE: (nods) So, you know, we're not even building any Social Security. I got my little statement from Social Security, which started to come when I was about 50. Well, here's how much you'll have to live on. It's, like, Oh my God. I've barely paid into the system at all, you know, so I can't exactly look forward to having some money when I'm not working.

But we have to find some way to really get a little more stable financially, so that some of the younger folks — we're not asking them to make that choice. I mean, nobody's ever going to get rich out of working at Arise. But if we're asking people to work for us, they should be able to make a living, you know. Until we can do that, I think we're going to have a hard time replacing me. So that's a real challenge for us. We've got to get financially more secure so that we don't have to ask people to make huge sacrifices to work for us. So, it's on my mind a lot.

FOLLET: I bet. You mentioned the need or the desire for position statements. If you were to write those now, what would they be?

BEWSEE: Um, I think one would be an anti-capitalist one — would have to be a real critique of the way our society runs, you know, with this incredible concentration of wealth. And people can get this. They do get it but it's like, if you say to most people, Why are people poor? They'll go, 'Cause we don't have any money. Or they'll say, Because other people have too much. So that's the foundation. And I think that we don't do enough explicit work on breaking it down, showing how it works, and more than that, showing that there are alternatives. And sometimes when you do talk anti-capitalist stuff to folks with some education, they'll say, What's the alternative? Well, I don't know what the alternative is, and we're not going to know what the real alternatives are until we start unpacking this.

I think another thing that I'd like to tackle, you know, that sort of goes with the anti-capitalism stuff, is there are many, many things that we can do for ourselves and each other that help us survive in the structure of this society, but the main value of the — so, for example, worker co-ops. We're just recently now trying to figure out how to help some of our members who seem to be unable to get employed in the regular system promote the skills that they do have — hairdressing and housecleaning and carpentry, things like that.

So I see those as really valuable. One, for what they do for the people involved in them, and two, for what they teach us about other models. But in no way do I think we're ever going to have a revolution

in this country simply by creating enough of those kinds of things that suddenly they, you know, reach some critical mass and become the new way of doing things. So they're valuable for what they teach us and they're valuable for the individual people that are helped by them.

But I want to do more on breaking down some of the myths that, you know, so many of us still buy into — that if we're poor, it's our own fault, because we're not motivated or nothing. Something I'll say to folks sometimes, you know, as a part of hoping to turn on that light bulb, is, I don't think you should have to be extra smart — which I am, I'm very smart — I don't think you should have to be extra smart or extra lucky, or extra ambitious just to get by. If we're not living in a world that works for the regular people, then something's wrong.

So, you know, there's always still this, Oh, I could do better. I've made mistakes. I heard some homeless guys say it yesterday at our Tent City speak-out. Well, I know we've made mistakes. I've made some mistakes in my life. Well, if you're poor and you make a mistake, oh, man, it could be fatal. It could send you on a road downward that you might never go uphill again. You know, if you're the owning class and you make those mistakes, you can bounce right back.

So I want to do more analysis in a way that helps people really get this. That of course we should use the skills we have and learn more and try not to make mistakes in our lives and do the best we can, but it's not going to work like that for everybody. Like I said earlier, if everybody stayed in school, does that mean that everybody would get a good education? No, it doesn't.

So that's another thing, trying to figure out how to take the self-blame blinders off. But I understand why people do that, because — and this is something else again, I think with more pop ed and more education — because that's all people have control of, or feel like they do. You know, I understand why some addicts get really scared if you challenge the AA model, because that's at least something they've got control of and they don't have control of the larger issues — or at least, not individually, only through political organizing. So it's not an either/or thing. We're not trying to take away people's power to make change in their lives, you know, but to be able to set it up like that.

Racism: I could work on that one really forever and I would like to be able to — I mean, I need to do this work myself, but I would like to be able to help white people understand why racism is such an essential issue to tackle if you're doing social justice work, and not like, Oh, yeah, and some day, we'll get to that, too — why it has to be integrated into the work we do, or it becomes very dichotomous without it. You got to do that.

FOLLET: You mentioned when we were breaking that Arise doesn't seem to need either a policy or committee on gay and lesbian issues. Tell me more about that.

BEWSEE: Oh, maybe we will someday. I won't say the time won't ever come when there's a real reason. I think when we got started, if there were gays and lesbians in the organization, they didn't say much about it. But the more work we've done, the more out people are and the more comfortable they feel about being who they are in the organization — and especially, I've seen in women who are incarcerated, that so many women while they're in jail have relationships with other women. And some were lesbian before they went in jail. Some didn't know they were lesbian until they were in jail. And some left jail and went back to basically heterosexual relationships but, you know, found themselves changed by having had this experience with another woman.

And so, people are out more in Arise and not as a political issue per se, but it's just, like, Hey, we're part of the poor people, too. You know, we're here, too. And we're just not all the same. We're not all white, we're not all heterosexual, you know, we're here. What I do always really enjoy is seeing folks that come in kind of homophobic and find themselves working arm in arm with out lesbians and gays. Or maybe they're working with them for a while before they realize that, Oh, that's your girlfriend? Oh, I thought it was your roommate or your sister or whatever. I didn't realize that — that's your partner? Oh, OK. And then all of a sudden, to be homophobic means to be against your comrades.

And one thing that happens in Arise — and I've had some conflicted feelings about it, but mostly I think it's OK — is that I said we're not doctrinaire, and we're not. And yet, some people will come in and sort of feel out what's acceptable and what isn't and they might wind up taking a position that on their own they wouldn't have. But, you know, the climate of the organization — so out on the street, they might be homophobic, but if you walk into Arise, you can't be. You know, you'll get called on it. You get called on that, you get called on racism, you get called on sexism. And it can be hairy sometimes.

The war was a good example for me. There were a fair number of people that did have sort of initially knee-jerk reactions after 9/11 — our country's been attacked — and then they get in Arise and we're against the war. And so, before there's a whole lot of analysis, they'll find themselves against the war. And then the analysis gets built.

So, it's kind of an interesting thing that plays out and I've seen it a lot with gays and lesbians in the organization. Like, well, you may be homophobic but you're going to have to keep it to yourself, or you're going to have to undo it. It's not acceptable here. And then after a while, it ceases to be an important distinction, or it's a distinction in ways that people wouldn't have thought of. So, I guess a recent example has been around a year ago, you know, around getting the right to marry in Massachusetts —

FOLLET: Just a year ago today, I think.

BEWSEE: Just a year ago. So, you know, that's really great. Well, a lot of the straight people in the organization assume that every lesbian in the organization is fighting for the right to marry. Instead, probably a good half of the women who are lesbian in our organization are like, I don't believe in marriage. I don't care if it's between a man and a woman or a woman and a woman. Why are we fighting for the right to get married? Why aren't we fighting for the right to have health care and not live in poverty if we're lesbians?

So, it's such an eclectic mix, that somebody that just walks in the door is going to — I said osmosis. You sort of absorb some political climate and then go back and sort of fill in why it is that way. And we would never do that all the time with all the big issues but you come in, it's right there on the wall, our anti-oppression policy. You know, it's just about the first thing people learn about us, and if they don't buy it or understand it all at once, that's OK, because we'll start with behavior and then go from there. I hope that makes sense.

FOLLET: Yeah, yeah. The anti-oppression policy — that's, I guess, some of the newer materials that will eventually come to the Sophia Smith Collection.

BEWSEE: You bet.

FOLLET: Uh-huh. I'm excited that you're going to mark the 20 years. What kind of event is it going to be?

BEWSEE: Well, we still have to completely figure that out and I hope we don't get too busy to do it this year. And also, we're wicked broke. But what I picture is we find some banquet hall, you know, some VFW. I mean, we can't afford Chez Josef and we wouldn't go there anyway, because people need to be comfortable. But some big place that holds three or four hundred people, that we can find everybody — even the people who left on bad terms or whatever should have the opportunity to come and celebrate 20 years of hanging in there.

So I think we would do a lot of eating, have some entertainment. We have a lot of great poets in Arise, and celebrate each other, and celebrate hanging in. We also have members who've died, and I want to make sure that they are acknowledged and that people may not remember them, may not have known them, but they made contributions.

FOLLET: Celebrate your history?

BEWSEE: Yeah, yeah. Do a collage for each year and go through all our material. When I do get a chance to do that, I'm going, Oh, yeah. And then some of it is sad, too. I pulled a flyer out of the file the other day that I thought, How did this get in here? And it was about the Gulf War, a great flyer organizing about the Gulf War, but it wasn't this Gulf War. It

was the one before. So, to see how we've hung in through the years and tackled these different issues.

FOLLET: I wonder — your decision to place the records of the organization at the Sophia Smith Collection so that the history will be kept and people can learn from it. But it's also an example of crossing the "tofu curtain," as you called it — it's a great expression. Was that a tough decision?

BEWSEE: Well, we talked about it a couple of different [times]. I think you came — was it you and Sherrill [Redmon, director of the Sophia Smith Collection]? Did you both come to a board meeting? — and talked about it. And then we talked about it again. I'm probably the most possessive, because I am a compulsive saver. They may not be organized very well but, you know, I'll take something and I'll stick it in a file drawer because I want that history to be there. But I realize that most people never go and look. So I'd actually like to create some three-ring binders for us that sort of go year by year and some of the issues that we worked on and who it was who was doing the work.

I just did that for Sanctuary City, you know, made some three-ring binders to document that particular thing. So when I realized that we could do that, you know, that we could take some stuff out and create these binders for ourselves — because the truth is, nobody was going in the files. Nobody was looking at stuff that was done ten years ago. So why were a few of us, like, oh, I don't know, letting them go.

And, I don't know how much anybody will learn from reading them, really, because I think you kind of learn by doing. But it's an honor, you know. I still feel so surprised that we would be approached by you guys about doing this. So, it's definitely an honor and it values the work of low-income people, and that feels important and that doesn't happen all that often. So even now, when people come in and they've been around for a while and if it comes up — well, you know, we're going to be archived — they're like, Really? Somebody cares about what we do?

FOLLET: You bet.

BEWSEE: Yeah, so that's nice to see that in people when they hear about that. So.

FOLLET: I'm thrilled about it. We're all thrilled about it.

BEWSEE: We'll get it together.

FOLLET: It's just a fabulous example of the kind of grassroots work that we all need to learn from. And that's what saving it will accomplish.

BEWSEE: Well, good. Maybe it'll be more useful than I think, right off, to somebody.

- FOLLET: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. The fact that you have been such a great saver, that there — I've already learned an enormous amount, by going through the ten or 12 —
- BEWSEE: Little bit of stuff —
- FOLLET: — boxes that are there and the thought that there will be more is just fabulous.
- BEWSEE: Yeah, because that's, I bet, mostly peripheral stuff, too. You don't even have our board minutes yet. But it'll be good for me, too. You know, just looking and reviewing. And there are things we've lost I'd like to see us recapture. That's one nice thing about always having new people, because they start out — . I realized the other day that sometimes we would demand things from people in power because they were our right. Now I know that they won't give them to us, but that's no reason to stop demanding them. But I'll be tending maybe to put my efforts into something more direct that we can accomplish, like Tent City, but that doesn't mean we should stop demanding. So, that's another reason we've got to always have fresh leaders. People who say, But that's our right, let's go demand it — rather than riding on experience, people who say, Well, they're not going to give it to us, so let's do something else.
- FOLLET: Tell me about the role that your daughters play now in your life. Your older daughter came back at the age of 17 into your life, and Emily has always been with you. How do they feel about your political work?
- BEWSEE: Well, it'll be interesting to see how that sorts out, you know, through the years and as they mature. Emily and Jess and my granddaughter, who lived with me with Jess until she was about ten, and then they moved to Boston, and then Emily moved to Boston a couple of years ago. So I dragged them both into Arise for some various time periods. Jesse helped with voter registration and did some welfare rights organizing. And then she got pregnant and said, "Well, I'm not going to be on welfare the rest of my life." So, she went to STCC [Springfield Technical Community College] and became a court reporter, which now she couldn't do, because it was a three-year program and now you can only be on welfare for two years. But she makes a good living now. She does closed captioning for the hearing impaired at WGBH.
- And, um, my granddaughter has a beautiful voice. It's so nice. I'm so thrilled.
- FOLLET: No kidding.
- BEWSEE: And she sings and she sings in the school shows and joined a church so she could sing in their choir and I was thinking, now maybe — she's always wanted to be vet, and maybe she'll minor in that, in music.

And Emily was very active in Arise, especially around globalization issues. And she was the first in our family to go to a four-year college, and of course, like many kids, couldn't do a damn thing with her degree when she got out, which I think was history. And she spent about six months in Nicaragua. And she was a paralegal at Legal Services for a few years. And then she decided to go back to the sort of stuff she was interested in at seven or eight. It's so interesting how this happens. She was always interested in herbs. So she's now going to acupuncture school and it's a three-year program. She's got one more year after this. And she's living with a state cop, which is a huge major adjustment for me, but we're working it out because one of the things I'm learning and still learning is to separate the institutions from the people in it. You know, a lot of cops are real assholes, but a lot aren't. So it's been challenging. We have some good political discussions. And maybe they're going to get married. I don't know. We'll see. I wouldn't mind having another grandkid. I really wouldn't. It would be fun.

But I'm happy with both of them. They're both doing well. They both, however, I found out recently, feel they had very — that I neglected them terribly for the sake of Arise —

FOLLET: Oh, boy.

BEWSEE: — and that I dragged them to meetings, but I think they'll get over it. I think they'll get to the point, sort of like [where] I've gotten, where I can look back and see the good things I got from my mom and dad and — you know, I think they'll get over it. But right now, that's their frame of reference. Well, [for] Mom, Arise was more important to her than we were. But it wasn't. I was fighting for them, too. But I think it'll be OK.

FOLLET: And e.e. cummings may have the last word on that, huh?

BEWSEE: Yeah, yeah. I did the best I could. Farewell.

FOLLET: Well —

BEWSEE: I see the camera is blinking.

FOLLET: The camera is blinking and it's just about to — yeah, I think we're done. We could try to say a final word. Would you like to say a parting word? We're going to run out of time.

BEWSEE: You know, I think I just did, so it's OK.

FOLLET: Michaelann, thank you very much for your work, for saving the records of your work, and for sharing your time. I really appreciate it. I'm honored.

BEWSEE: Me, too. Me, too. Thanks. It's good to have some time to think.

END TAPE 6

TAPE 7

FOLLET: OK. Well, encore. (laughs) I can't tell you how often this happens. You know, you think you've wrapped up and we've turned it off and then, it's just this unfolding that starts to happen that's a little different from being on tape. But you started to talk about the tent city and how fundamental it is, and so, you're good enough to share those thoughts.

BEWSEE: Well, it seems to me that what's going on and how people are figuring out ways to meet their own needs when the policymakers can't meet those needs or don't choose to meet them, and where it takes us in terms of, you know, whose voices are valued and who gets to make the decisions on how society is structured to meet or not meet different needs. We've always worked on homelessness as an issue, although it's tended to be more with families, because more of our members are women, and more of single homeless people are men. You know, there's a lot of women, too, but women tend to have more extended families and a few more places to lay their heads than guys do. And [men] are not so knowledgeable about how to use family resources, or they may be more individualistic, or think they should be, or have more sense of failure as men, you know, for being homeless.

So, ten, actually 14 years ago, we were involved in something called the Warming Place, which was an effort on the part of the Open Pantry to provide shelter for single homeless people when there wasn't one. And the Warming Place moved around from, I think, 25 different churches. It would move every night, and one of the places it would come was Arise. I think we were the only community organization that was willing or had enough room for 30, 35 people to set up cots.

And that kind of went along with an effort to get the city to take more responsibility for homeless people, and it kind of ended when an organization called Friends of the Homeless was formed and they started providing shelter for single homeless people. But they were never well run, and they've gotten more and more corrupt through the years. Their leader's under indictment for fraud and he would take wicked advantage of homeless people and have them work on his home and — you know, pretty corrupt.

So, last year, the Warming Place started up again, and I was on the Open Pantry board at that time, too. I really don't get on other people's boards all that often, because I don't have time to do a good job, but I think I served two years out of my three-year term on the Open Pantry board. That's twice, two out of the three years. So, I'm not going to join their board again. But my sister Liz, who's very active with Arise, was working at the Warming Place, and, you know, she would tell me about different folks who were down there and who she liked and who she thought had a head on their shoulders.

And last year, there was something called the Abolish Poverty March, and it wasn't terribly well organized but it was an effort that Sisters Together Ending Poverty put together and a group of poor

people went to something like 20 different communities, and they came to Springfield, I think, in March. So we organized to host them and we recruited a lot of folks who stayed at the Warming Place to come up and join us for supper and hear some speeches.

And there was one woman in particular, Christina, that just really stood out to me, who had come up from the Warming Place. And I'm always looking for snatching folks up — we got to keep cultivating [them]. And there were some other homeless folks, too, that came up that seemed to be looking for a place. But we hadn't taken it on as an issue to figure out what was going to happen when the Warming Place closed until just before it closed. Actually, what we were going to do was take over a building. There was a nursing home that seemed really like it would make a great place and as we were talking to homeless people, what you hear all the time is, like, Well, we have skills. We'll work hard. We'll go in and fix up the building, and we'll take it over.

So we were very much thinking that maybe when the Warming Place ended, what we'd do is take over this building. Then we actually got into a dialogue with the city that led us to believe, sort of in spite of myself, that they were sincere in looking at this issue of tax title property, because they owned it, and people wanted to get hold of some of this property and fix it up.

So as we got closer to the Warming Place [ending], we thought, Well, shit, if we take over this building, are we going to totally blow any opportunity to work with the city, to actually win a concrete gain? And, you know, it's not a decision we have to make very often, because usually there's no way we're going to win something like that. But in this case, we had a new mayor, we wanted to give him a chance, he seemed sincere. Two guys had frozen to death that winter, so that was really what started the organizing and why the Warming Place started again. It was after the death of these two guys, because it was a wicked cold winter.

So we decided we weren't going to take over the building, we were going to try to see what happened. Well, what happened was that the Warming Place was supposed to close April 30th, and it got a little bit of an extension. And as the Open Pantry raised money, they'd buy one more day of time, staff time, but finally it came to an end. Mother's Day was the last day last year that the Warming Place was open. And when it closed, the next day like ten folks came up to the office to say, Well, what can we do about this? And one of them was Christina and some other folks that we'd been working with. And we just sat around. What can we do? And a friend of Christina's is a very vulnerable woman with mental health issues, you know, had been really terrified being back out in the open, and you know, trying to sleep on a park bench or find a place to sleep where she didn't feel like she was going to be attacked.

And so, we came up with an idea for Tent City and we really — you know, the mayor doesn't believe us to this day, but we did not know 24 hours before we did it that we were going to do it. We really didn't know. So, we tried to figure out where we could go where we wouldn't

be arrested and hoped, you know, a church would do it. So about five o'clock that day — you know, we made it late in the day so that maybe they wouldn't have time to respond institutionally — [we] went down and set up some tents on the lawn at St. Michael's Cathedral. And then, I think we also figured that the Catholic Church probably needed some good publicity at that point, so they might be less likely to kick us off.

So, I think there were 12 people the first night. By the end of the week there were 40 people, by the end of ten days there were 60 people, and more and more people just started coming. In fact, over the summer, although we didn't keep records with everybody's name — because a lot of people had warrants, you know, and we didn't want to keep a list that the police could come and seize — but we figure about 400 people stayed there over the course of that summer. Some people were there from day one and they were there until it closed. And some people stayed there until they could get their shit together and get an apartment and go somewhere else, and of course new people became homeless. It was very, very controversial, and we took a lot of heat from everybody — the mayor, the Church, the people who lived in the Classical Condominiums across the street who really thought that they shouldn't have to look out their window and see people sleeping in tents.

We didn't run it. What we did was we said, We're going to provide support for people to run it themselves. And what I'll say is that we ran it for six months. We did it for six months, and then the first week in November was the ending day and the Warming Place opened up again. And we certainly did not win any allies, any institutional allies, for that effort. So, then the Warming Place opened up, Christina had gotten herself an apartment and some other folks who are leaders got together, and then we started all over.

The Warming Place stepped in. Liz was still working there. It was harder for her to identify leaders, because one of the dynamics that happened was people assumed there'd be another Tent City when the Warming Place closed. And, you know, that's not a fair assumption. We're not doing another Tent City unless homeless people are involved in the effort. We're not social service providers. So unless people get involved in this — and it was pretty late in the day that folks did.

And what's been very interesting, and this is all really recent — the threat of there being another Tent City has made the city manage to come up with some more funding to keep the Warming Place open longer. And on Friday we found out that it was going to be extended until June 30th and that maybe by then the city would find someplace else.

So I have some very mixed feelings about it. It was so much hard work. I was so exhausted at the end of last year, and you know, everything from intervening in fights and figuring out what to do with people who were ripping other people off and still develop leaders, but it was also wonderful to see what people could do for themselves given an opportunity. And everyone who lived there had to recognize that they

were part of a political movement, whether they were part of Arise or not.

And we did some other things. We sent folks to live in Bushville, which was a tent city that Kensington Welfare Rights set up at the Republican National Convention, and they came back and said, Wow, our tent city was so much more together than their tent city — and, you know, this little regional pride on what we were able to get together.

FOLLET: What do you mean, it was together? How so?

BEWSEE: Well, we drove everybody down there. I was actually pretty mad at Kensington and I've still got some stuff to process with them, because we knew we were going to make this trip, and one of the things that I needed to know was, do people have to bring their own tents? Because, you know, we're asking people if they took their own tents with them, then they might not have a space when they got back, or they'd have to set up in a different place in their own tent city, and some people didn't have tents, they were sharing them with others, so. And I knew that Kensington had to keep their site secret for as long as possible because the police had their eye on them, too.

But it became this issue and even some class stuff, a lot of Kensington's — I don't know. I got to figure out about them. They're very connected now with a lot of universities and social work programs, and I'm not positive how much they're really still led by poor people, you know. I just — I need to go check it out.

So the guy that we were talking with had actually been an intern at Arise about four years before and now he was working for Kensington and he was organizing this. And every day I'd call [and ask him,] Gary, do people need to bring their own tents? So finally he said no. This was, like, two days [before we were going to leave]. "They don't. We've got it set up for people." Well, we get down there and it's the most appalling setup I've ever seen. It was a really small lot. It was full of round stones about two inches in diameter, full of broken glass, and not a tent to be seen. And of course, we'd gone down there with no tents. And we had almost no money, either, so it wasn't like we could go out and buy tents for people.

And our people were fantastic. I wasn't staying there, you know, but I was driving the van. They were fantastic. Somebody else took the van and drove around the Bronx and found old mattresses that were being thrown out, and brought those back. And then we went to the hardware store and got some big tarps and rope and they got rigged over the mattresses. And so people did it. They pulled it off.

But I was just furious. I said, "You know, come on. These are not people who are playing. These are not people who are coming to a tent city for political reasons and later they're going home." So I was really furious, because I felt they'd not represented the real situation. And in fact, four people decided, No, we're not staying, we're going home to Tent City in Springfield. But ten did stay, and they were there for a

week and it was really good for them, and they were part of a larger political movement, and that was good. But I don't know what was up with [the organizers], you know?

FOLLET: You mentioned that you didn't win any allies by what you did in Springfield, but somehow it's still a very important effort. What are the lessons of it?

BEWSEE: Well, one is to be really clear that if you can't take care of us, we're taking care of ourselves, you know, and that people had the capacity to do that. Now, that's not true on every front. I mean, we don't have too many doctors among the homeless, although we do have an RN and he provided some pretty basic health care last year for people. So, it's not true that in every case we can find a way to do that, but in this one, [if] the city can't provide a shelter, the people will provide their own shelters.

Well, and what Christina always says, and it's true, we didn't do it to make a political point. We did it to provide shelter. So that's a little different for us, but it was also the reality. We were dealing with the reality of people who now had nowhere to go and they were poor and lots of them were sick, and, you know, lots of mental illness and lots of substance abuse, but they did it. They did it, they pulled this off.

So this year, you know, we said, Well, if the Warming Place closes, we're going to have to do it again. It was actually much more of a burden with the advance notice than it was just doing it, because now we knew all the things that had gone right and all the things that had gone wrong and what we could do. But the city totally shut down and stopped talking to Arise after Tent City last year. And in fact, they didn't even talk to each other or to the service providers that we can't stand — you know, *they* weren't even meeting. Meanwhile, the head of the shelter was getting indicted, the head of the Springfield Housing Authority was getting indicted, so it wasn't until March that — the city still wouldn't talk to us, and we didn't call them, but we let it be known that we'd do another Tent City.

Then the politics started, you know, the mayor would meet with some ministers, then a minister would call me up. He'd say, Well, you know, we care about the homeless, too. We house the Warming Place, or we have a soup kitchen. But the mayor's in the middle of very difficult negotiations with the state, because, you know, we're almost in receivership. We're operated right now by a control board because we're in such a major financial crisis because of corruption with the previous administration.

FOLLET: The city is.

BEWSEE: Yeah. So, you know, the word would get back to us. Well, the mayor — and this is sort of near the end — and the mayor says, If you start a tent city, it will damage negotiations with the state that might lead to a long-

term solution for homelessness. And my point to the minister was, Well that's a little tough. That's like going into the soup kitchen and telling people that if they eat now, they might not be able to eat in three months. But if you're hungry now, are you going to go without? And he said, Well, I can see where you'd have a hard time saying that to homeless people. I said, Well, I wouldn't say that to homeless people. Let the mayor come say it to homeless people. Let him go down and explain to people why having a tent city this year will mean that they might not have a decent shelter next year. Of course, he says he will, but I don't think he actually will do it.

So then we got called by the city, and that was a big surprise, and that was in early April. The head of housing is not a woman that I like very much, but we've managed to stay amicable with each other somehow, anyway. So we had three meetings. And the first two meetings were very interesting. I said, Look, you're not going to get this together. Why don't you let us have a special-use permit for a tent city?"

And meanwhile, the city council had said some absolutely outrageous things for solutions. Like, one guy wanted to put skunk-scented spray in all the buildings to keep homeless people from moving into them. Another was going to pass an ordinance making tent cities illegal. And then [City Councilor] Dom Sarno, he said he'd hire a "compassion bus," in quotes, and drive homeless people to Longmeadow, which is our wealthy suburb, and say, Well, why should[n't] Springfield share the burden? Well, you know, because there's not that many homeless people that come from Longmeadow.

So the first two meetings actually seemed kind of fruitful. I found out that the director, she'd been doing her own research on tent cities and so had we. So we knew there were some excellent models of tent cities out there, most of them on the West Coast, but they did exist. And what a surprise to go in and see pages she'd printed off the Internet about tent cities. And so, for a little while, it looked like the city might give us a special use permit. But at the third meeting, it came down to, Well, the mayor said no, and the control board said no. It's like, OK, Kathleen, you know, we're just going to do what we have to do.

So then there was the effort by the ministers to try to talk us out of doing a tent city, because they had gotten together with the mayor and they believed he was sincere and they believed that if we did a tent city, it really [would] hurt homeless people in the long term. And the ministers said, "Well, you really —." I said, "Well, the city won't even talk to us." Well, you embarrassed the mayor. You embarrassed the mayor and he's trying to do a good job and you embarrassed him." All I could say, "Look, Reverend Goth. I'm sorry about that. But if I take a scale and I put the embarrassment of the mayor on one side and then homeless people not having a place to live on the other, it doesn't weigh as much."

So I think the fact that they knew when we kept saying, We don't want to do a tent city and we won't do it unless you stop providing

shelter — and if you stop providing shelter, we will do it. There's been one extension, one two-week extension, then another two-week extension. Now a six-week extension, and the word is the mayor would like to meet with me and members of Arise or the homeless community. They'd rather it not be 35 people. They'd like to have it be a small enough group to really think about some long-term strategies.

Well, we've got 'em. We've got 'em, and they're the same things we said last year, exactly. The city owns property, tax title property. Instead of selling it for a profit, give it to homeless people or, what would probably be more likely, is give it to nonprofits that will develop all kinds of models. And there's not a single homeless person there that there couldn't be a model created for, that they could do it.

We need boarding houses for people. We've lost all those single-room occupancies through the years. There's not one person who's too drug addicted or too mentally ill to be able to survive in the right model of housing. It just doesn't fit the existing models. So, think outside the box. Instead of trying to make people fit the models, develop models that fit the people. You know, it's so obvious.

So, that's what we've got going for us right now. We've got some really, really — finally as we got closer to the deadline, the leaders started to emerge. And so, the new leaders from the newly homeless — plus we still have Christina and Bruce and other people who were leaders last year, although they're not homeless anymore. And then a bunch of our leaders are in jail from last year and writing to me and saying, Hey, when I get out of jail, is there going to be a tent city to go to? So, you know, we're collectively responsible for those people's well-being, and we take that very seriously.

So, I think what people are learning — and it goes back to, like, your innate experience. You ask people why they're poor, or why they're homeless, and they know why. What they don't know is any other way of doing things particularly, just like, you know, a fish in the water doesn't recognize the water, so a lot of us, we don't recognize the capitalism and the profit-driven motives around how housing is or is not provided. So that's our job to do, you know, to keep putting it so that people really understand the big picture about why they're homeless.

And then people come up and they use the computer and we've identified other tent cities. And yesterday was very fun, because it was International Tent City Day, which I'm sure the city thinks we made up, but we didn't, you know. It was actually started out in Dignity Village, which is in Portland, Oregon. They said, Well, let's do an International Tent City Day. And within the next six weeks, we'd identified 40 communities, and we know there are thousands.

In fact, I read an article in the *Times* not long ago that said almost a quarter of the world's population is living in unsanctioned, unincorporated shanty towns or tent cities, you know. Most of the poor people in Brazil are living in shanty towns, and some of them on the sides of huge slag and dump heaps that periodically collapse and kill people.

But, you know, people are fighting to find their own solution. It just can't stop there, you know. We have a right to these resources, you know. Just keep throwing [these ideas] out [there]. Well, everybody who's homeless pays taxes, even if they've never worked a day in their life, and most people have worked a lot of their lives, but even so, if you put gas in your car or you buy anything that there's sales tax on, they're paying taxes. This is our money. We have a right to decide how we're going to use it.

So, it's an interesting challenge. It looks like we won't have a tent city at least until June 30th, and maybe not at all, because it's this sword hanging over the city's head, and they don't want it to fall. So, they're trying to find solutions, and of course we're going to go for it. We're going to meet with the mayor. I mean, how stupid would it be to say, No, we'd rather do a tent city than meet with the mayor and look for long-term solutions. But on the other hand, the minute things aren't fruitful or the minute people have no place to go, they know we'll do another tent city. So life is very interesting, very interesting.

FOLLET: When I think of the emergence of your political analysis and coming to the sort of ah-ha, there is a way of looking at this that makes it all make sense, that radical analysis, and then your lack of trust in the state, and yet working with low-income and poor people who are not respected by the state, but needing to work with the state in spite of that radical analysis, it's –

BEWSEE: Yeah, yeah, and this is also why we continue to need new leaders and why I personally — and I know some other Arise members avoid doing a lot of cross-class work and a lot of — like, now I would never join the Infant Mortality Task Force, which I'm not even sure still exists, but I don't want to sit in the room with service providers, as nice as they are, because I never want it to cross my mind that, Man, I hate to go picket them because they really are nice people, you know, and I don't ever want to be held back from being on the right side because I've developed a relationship with someone who is oppressing poor people, no matter how nice they are. And we just try to keep our karma clean in that regard, you know.

And sometimes it means we lose out in some ways so that we can avoid that occasion of sin, and that risk of getting too friendly with the nice people who work in oppressive institutions. But I suppose over the years I have picked up some of that. I know a lot of these folks, and I know they're not evil people, and I don't want our decisions to be made on the basis of saying we don't want to embarrass the mayor.

So it's better, but I'm sure I've picked up some of that through the years, and people can be personally hurt. I've run into people that said, I don't understand why you attacked my organization. That really hurt me. And I know that's true. They're individually very hurt by our criticism. So, it's better not to have to think about that kind of stuff and to avoid those relationships. Stay pure. (laughs)

So there is that good little — I mean, I'm loving this. As exhausting as it's been, maybe the couple of years before that, I'd been more caught up than I wanted to be into some of the internal stuff, because I knew how to do it, write a grant, do this or that, and I'm like, No, I've got to be organizing. That's what juices me. So now, I need the balance between organizing and — not the administrative stuff, but you know, the long-term planning and the position papers and the popular education, because that's what helps us to stay going, too. But I needed, just, like, some direct action and so it's felt good.

FOLLET: I can tell it just fires you. Let me ask one last question: the funding. How do you fund Arise?

BEWSEE: We write grants, which are harder to get, and tend to be kind of the prey of whatever's fashionable for the funders to do. Donations are actually a bigger and bigger part of our budget, which is still a small budget. I think, I think we're probably floating about 120,000 [dollars] a year right now.

FOLLET: As an annual budget?

BEWSEE: Yeah, but the three or four years before that, it was more like 160 [thousand], and you'd be surprised what a difference that 40,000 makes. It means we can pay our bills and pay our staff. And occasionally we'll do events, which don't generally produce what the effort is that you put into them. And we do speaking engagements. So the committee that's really done the most this year, the Women in Support of Each Other Committee, which is the anti-jail and the de-crim[inalization] of prostitution and drugs work, speaks at colleges and gets paid. So they might get 250 bucks for doing a workshop. So I think we could do better with that, and if we had more long-term strategy involved here, we would do more of that and say, you know, if you want to be in it, help support the work. And that's it.

And we actually did ask for the first city money we've ever asked for, to keep our little family shelter going. We applied for — it's actually federal money that the city administers. We asked for 13,000 to keep our shelter open, and we didn't get it, and we didn't expect to get it, and it was revenge. I mean, maybe we wouldn't have gotten it anyway, so two weekends ago, we had to shut down the shelter, and we'd ran it for two and a half years. We got some great members out of it, too, but we just couldn't keep it going. It was costing more than we could bring in. And, you know, I hope we'll be able to do it again, but it'll depend. So, that's where we —

Oh, and a little merchandizing, you know, tee-shirts, buttons, the hair scrunchies, and we're going to do more of that. I just went out and found some great twine at the all-for-a-dollar store, and we have community service folks and we have members and meetings, and we can make plant hangers. And so, you know, it seems like a good time of

year to be getting them out. So we'll do more of that, and some bake sales. It's been a long stretch of being broke.

I'm afraid we're going to lose Tory [Field]. I hope not, but I'm worried that if we can't find a way to pay her more regularly, and she's taken in — the 15-year-old kid of a homeless family is now living with her in a studio apartment and, and so now she's supporting two people. And it's not like we pay — I said, it's a consultant basis. And so for 48 — it's ten dollars an hour, so for 40 hours you're supposed to get 400 bucks, but it's averaged out more like 150 over the last six months. So I know people can't go on like that forever.

FOLLET: How many people are on that status right now?

BEWSEE: Me, Tory are the two full-time [people]. Liz [Bewsee] runs the food pantry, and she should be getting 150 a week. And then we have a bookkeeper. And those are actually the only paid people right now. We really, really could not only use getting paid ourselves, it would be really nice to be able to bring on another organizer, and it would be nice to be able to hire a resource development person. We have a really good resource development committee, but everybody's also working on other committees or at other jobs and we need somebody to help us coordinate it. So.

FOLLET: Yes.

BEWSEE: We're hoping, we're hoping.

FOLLET: Keep hope alive. Again, thank you.

BEWSEE: You're welcome. It was fun.

FOLLET: Onward.

BEWSEE: My hair was over this microphone. Oh, well.

END TAPE 7

END OF INTERVIEW

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