Alison (A): So if you could just start by saying your name and a little bit about yourself

Micaela(M): Yeah, my name is Micaela. I'm 20 years old. I am black and Okinawan. I wasn't born in Colorado, I was born in Kansas. I moved here when I was 11 years old. I currently live with my mom because cost of living here is ridiculous and I can't afford to live by myself yet. But yeah, I did school, I did college for like four semesters and then COVID hit. Online school is incredibly hard for me. So I decided to drop out and I'm currently not, it's not really on my radar just because finances and money stresses me out so much that I don't even want to think about the debt. I'm still paying off student loans from last year. So, it's just a lot.

A: When did you start working at SOS?

M: Yeah, I started not too long ago. I started in June actually, yeah.

A: Can you tell me about how you found the job? How you chose it? Kind of the process of that?

M: Yeah, for sure. So I have a friend named Ivy. She works at the St. Francis Day Center and you know I was having these conversations with her about how I was tired of working retail jobs and working jobs that I didn't feel mattered to me and it was kind of , I was getting burnt out from being degraded and yelled at by all these people, you know. I'm like I’m just trying to fold clothes, like ( laughs). So, right, like please calm down, let's take a breath. So, yeah, she actually talked to Ian, the site manager here and told him how passionate I am about helping marginalized people in general. He was like tell her to apply and so she sent me the, I don't know what it's called but the documents basically like saying what the job is, requirements, whatever and I thought I wasn't qualified for it. So I didn't apply for a while. I eventually, this girl, was just like ' dude go for it'. Even if you don't think that you're qualified, just apply anyway. So, I did, wrote the cover letter, got an interview, got the job, on the spot. So yeah, I'm just really grateful for the opportunity to like be in a space that I'm passionate about, like, I truly am just grateful everyday. I haven't had a day where I go home and I'm like ' I hate my job' which is like every other job.

A: And earlier you said, you're passionate about helping marginalized people, in general. Do you want to talk a little bit about where that passion came from?

M: Yeah. So, growing up, I didn't. My dad is black and my mom is Okinowan. However, I'm not that close with my dad's side. My mom, my, ok this is kind of a complicated story but my xxxx, my grandma, she just passed recently. She was an activist in Okinawa. She's Buddhist so, you know, the way that I was raised was based on these core values of like don't be disrespectful, don't ever like bully or harass anybody, stand up for people, it was just those kind of basic core values. I was never really taught about my history, like my ancestral history and about, you know, systemic racism, like beyond you know slurs and stuff like that. I think in ninth grade is when I really started to get into that. It was definitely a little bit before Trump got elected cause you know that was just everywhere. It was suddenly like everyone was having these conversations. So, I just read so much. I read so many books.

A: What did you read?

M:(sighs) Let me remember. I read a bunch of Audre Lorde.

A: ooh, yeah

M: I love her

A: oh yeah

M: I actually had forgotten about her until recently. So now I'm reading her again.

A: mmm, she's a good re-read

M: Yes, oh my god. Audre Lorde, just like, oh what is her name? Angela Davis.

A: Oh yeah

M: She has a book called ' Freedom Is A Constant Struggle', I think. It's just like a collection of her essays and interviews. And I've learned so much from that book and it was, at first it was very overwhelming. And actually, I feel like it was, it's still overwhelming but now that I'm in this kind of space where I'm helping unhoused people, I feel less powerless, you know. So yeah I've like, I feel like there's always been a passion to stand up for people but it became specific to standing up for oppressed peoples in high school because then I was actually learning about specific things and about you know, it actually isn't all sunshine and rainbows here. (laughs). There are actually deep issues here

A: Turns out

M: Right, breaking out of that bubble, I guess

A: Earlier than most people do

M: Yeah, yeah

A: Can you describe your first day of work at SOS?

M: Yeah, So actually used to work overnight shifts. So, it was 9:30pm-7:30am.

A: Can you describe your first night of work at SOS?

M: Yes

A: My bad

M: No you're good. My first night, I don't know what I was expecting, honestly. I thought that it would take awhile for people to warm up to me or for me to warm up to people but it was quite the opposite. I went and I talked to some residents here and they were just so open and welcoming and like we were listening to music together and they were showing me their favorite songs and like one of our community members like showed me this like food thing with like ice cream and soda,it was like a float, she made it herself. I'm already learning so much.

A: Did she have a name for that creation?

M: No, well, ok so it was vanilla ice cream and pineapple soda. It sounds very random but I swear it was good. I swear it was good.

A: A little tart with the dairy in there

M: yes, I was like, yeah I can do something with this. I know she was just experimenting but it was pretty fricking good. So that was my first like impression of working with these people and being here on site. It was a really good experience that first night even though I didn't really know what to do or what I was doing, just the interactions I had with people, I already felt connected to them on the first night. So that was amazing for me.

A: And that feeling of connection, do you see that among residents here, too?

M: Yes

A: And in what way? Do you have some examples of what that looks like?

M: Yeah, there is a sense of like, let me not say her name. One of the members the other day was helping me fix something and I was just like thanking her for helping me and stuff like that and she was just like 'yeah well we gotta look out for each other, cause who else is going to?' and I think that perfectly kind of captures the attitude that a lot of people here have is like, even if you don't necessarily have a personal relationship with other people, it's still, most of them are just trying to look after each other and still trying to make sure we're all ok. It's, it's very much a community. Like it's not, it's not individualistic, ya know. Everybody seems to respect everybody's space for the most part. You know there's obviously gonna be issue, we're all human, but I think in general because they have been through so many stuff and you know being out in the streets, I can't even like imagine that. Like , I can't even, that's not even something I can fathom. But I imagine after being out there in all the uncertainty, this kind of stability, just to have a place to go back to, a place to have your stuff and you know a place to get food, a place to talk to other people, place to smoke. I think it's, it does something to them that makes them want to be good to each other, you know, cause when you don't have that stability, it's just survival, it's just survival in your mind. In here it's still survival but it's like that's not like at the forefront of every decision that they make, it's more like they're thinking about other people as well. That was something that really impressed me because I know people who have never had to live on the streets and are still living with that mindset of like everything I do is just for me, ya know. They don't, they don't necessarily have to have that survival instinct but they do and so I was just, I was just so impressed by how genuine everybody in here is.

A: And I've noticed you used the phrase unhoused. I'd be curious to hear that versus people experiencing homelessness, and I'd also love to hear with your three months of working with this community and in this community, how you define homelessness or unhoused, if you prefer?

M: I think using unhoused, it's just like the natural thing that comes out of my mouth. I definitely did use to say homeless people before I got into this job. I've been learning a lot about language and how much it actually is like a deciding factor in a lot of these conversations, like how much it actually affects these conversations that we have and how using different terms humanizes people because I found that people experiencing homelessness are oftentimes dehumanized, you know. Like they're just treated like bottom of the barrel dirt in society. So, yah I use unhoused the most. I don't know why, it just rolls off my tongue, like it's just a habit now just to say unhoused. I think it kind of also humanizes them as well because when you say like homeless like home itself, the word home is like, when you think of home you think of like warmth and love and this and that and just because these people don't have a home, perse doesn't mean that they don't have that warmth, that love or that sense of community. So I do like to say unhoused because they're just people who don't have houses, you know, like they're just like the rest of us, they just don't have houses. I don't know how I would define homelessness. I think like people have this just one perception of what homelessness is and who people experiencing homelessness are and one thing I’ve learned in this job is that there's just so many different types of people who experience homelessness like none of them are the same, the only common thing that i've found within all them is that drive to hustle, that drive to be innovative, to think of new things, because they have had to but they even still do it in here like I've learned so many things in here

A: Can you give us some examples besides ice cream and pineapple juice, which is a good one?

M: I'm trying to think of what's not criminal activity.

A: I mean you can also say criminal activity just not use anyone's names if you want

M: I mean the other day I learned how to open a locked door with a card, with just a card

A: Yeah, I don't know how to do that

M: and I'm like ' i love this', I love that I’m learning this information right now, cause I’m definitely that mischievous, like do things I’m not supposed to kind of person

A: That's good knowledge

M: Right. Like when there's issues that arise in here, they're not the type to just I guess stand and watch, they're the type to throw out ideas. ' Hey even thought we don't have the supplies to do this, let's do this instead'. For example, today we don't have anybody that donated dinner. So, were having to buy dinner out of our pockets and they were just throwing out ideas to save money on dinner and stuff like that and like different things that we could do and I mean this is like, this is like a daily thing where they just come up with stuff

A: Right, they're very engaged and involved

M: Yes, they're problem solving is amazing. It's like, wow, I didn't even think of that. They're just so creative out there.

A: Wow, and then what would you say a typical day is like here, if it exists?

M: A typical day lately it's been actually very quiet.

A: And quiet means?

M: Quiet means there's not a lot of people out and about and if they are. they're just in that smoking area, you know just having good conversation. Yeah, that's what a normal day looks like and I come in at 10 am and you know, they love to sleep, so ( laughter) a lot of them are not awake and alive at 10 am. So yeah for the like the first few hours it's super quiet. I would say it gets the rowdiest around dinner but not in a bad way, it's just like you know everybody's out, everybody's eating like yeah it's just a great time, it just feels like a big group of friends, like just coming together. But yeah, typical day, pretty quiet. I'm feeling like that will change once we got more people in here.

A: Oh are you not fully...?

M: Yeah, we're, I believe we have 26 or 27 people in here right now and we have like 50 tents out there.

A: Wow, do you know why that is?

M: We are slowly letting people in as opposed to letting multiple people in at once, to I guess kind of like assimilate them, instead of like, this huge wave of people in here. Yeah, that was our site manager's decision and I honestly support that because I think it will be easier for everybody to adjust when we slowly let people in and they'll feel more comfortable

A: I feel like it keeps that community

M: Right, right, everybody will be a lot more comfortable if we do that, so yah. We're at half capacity right now. I'm willing to be when we're capacity, there's gonna be a little bit more going on

A: Yeah a little bit more noise, I think that's a pretty good bet

(laughter)

M: Yeah, right.

A: And this site is on a six month lease, is that correct?

M: Yes

A: Do you have any thoughts about that? And how does that change how you are like perceiving this space?

M: You know, when like , when I was looking at the job posting and it said it was a six month contract, I was confused cause I was just like , six months? What are you gonna do after that? But I know for this particular location, right now at least, I know that they're open to extending it past the six months. So my goal personally is to try to like try to handle every personal conflict or conflict with the neighbors or whatever with a lot of patience and compassion and like respect because I want this thing to keep going and I don't want it to be a war like us vs. them, you know. I want it to be just a collective us. So I've been trying to I guess teach people in here like ways to react or not react to certain situations. Like, I just had to tell a member the other day like it's ok to like wait and take a breath before you react or like it's ok to walk away before you react and I think it's important that we're pushing these healthy, healthier ways of setting boundaries and healthy ways of like communicating with other people because they're gonna see ' Oh hey they're actually learning how to like exist in a world outside of being homeless"

A: And sorry when you say they're gonna see, who do you mean by they?

M: I mean Regis. You know the big boss, whatever. I'm hoping that we get, as the school year starts, we get more like students as volunteers here, so that they can also speak on their experience cause I'm telling you, you know you can have your own perception on people but like until you actually have a conversation with them or like spend some time with them, I mean you never really know, like truly. So I think it's very important for, I mean Regis and we have neighbors who come and donate all the time actually which I was very surprised at.

A: You also said there was, has been some conflicts with neighbors. Do you have any examples?

M: Yeah. So you know that app, next-door, the next door app (laughs), my co-worker she loves to like argue with people in there cause they're just like, ' now that there's homeless people near us, like there's come and duhduhdudhduh' and they'll try to blame every single thing that happens in their neighborhood on people in here. First of all, they're not going in your neighborhood. If they leave, they're going to Denver Metro Area, like where all the resources and stuff are, like and I think recently one of them, one of the neighbors tried to blame a crime on somebody that was living in here and then they found out that it was actually somebody from within the neighborhood, which is often the case(laughs). So yea, it's just been kind of like, like I said, this whole idea of who people experiencing homelessness, like who they are because of their situation and just assuming that they would go and risk not having the stability anymore, like they would go and just commit a crime just to do it, you know.

A: Good point. So it's total unknowing of what it means to live here and how it's hard to live here.

M: Right. 100%. It's,it's I feel like at this point because of COVID, you know the spike of homelessness in Colorado and Denver, specifically, I just feel like you have to be willfully not paying attention, like you have to be willfully ignorant to not see that this could literally happen to anyone of us, you know. Like they're not far from us, like, we're all struggling to pay our bills and to live and to get food and stuff like that. They're not any different, they're not going to like, I don't know people just have this very like theatrical like view of anybody that's outside of their little bubble, if that makes sense. Like even just strangers on the street, they just have this like view

A: mmmm, I like that, theatrical

M: Right

A: When you encounter people with that out in the community or like, I don't know with some of your friends or family who like have that kind of willful ignorance, what do you do to advocate for people living here and people experiencing homelessness?

M: I think, homelessness in general has always been something that I, it's very easy for me to get loud and angry about because I just, I've always seen through all the bullshit, through everything that we've been fed to know about homeless people. I have, I do have some family members that I don't talk to, that try to make that argument of 'well why don't they just get a job, it's not that hard' , ' why don't they just get a job, why don't' they just dudhdudhdhudhd’ and like making these assumptions about drug addiction and stuff like that which is weird because alcohol and drug addiction runs in my family. So you would think that they would have a little bit of compassion for that but no. It's always just this dialogue of like 'lets like actually, can you like expand your mind outside a capitalistic society for a second and realize that everybody deserves to have access to food and to housing, like regardless of what you think they did or who you think they are, they deserve access to all of these things because it is your right as a human being to have food, to have housing, to have water, you know. Like, it's just getting them to see outside of whatever they think is political or whatever, whatever side they're on politically and just think as a human being, think as a human being.

A: It's easy to get on your soapbox and you...

M: yes, 100%. I'm like, like honestly if it was somebody that you knew, if it was a friend of yours, would you still be saying the same thing? Would you still be like ' well they just need to get a job', ' well nobody can help them if they don't help themself"

A: I see what you're saying. If the person experiencing homelessness was a friend of yours?

M: Right

A: Right

M: If you had a personal connection to them, would you still be saying that? I feel like a lot of people struggle with having compassion for other people that they don't know. That's so like, I can't even fathom that cause that's never been me, I guess. But yeah, it's just this whole like, let's look within because the problem isn't, the problem isn't everybody else, it's you, Sir, like, like it's you and it's your morals. Being raised on certain core values changes everything, like if you don't emphasize that as a parent, you know, not to discriminate or you know to stand up for people, if you don't seriously like emphasize that, like put it into your child's brain, it's like, you can so easily just believe everything and like, just be victim to all the stereotypes and all these things that people think about people, like even news channels, like, you hardly ever see stories about like people experiencing homelessness doing stuff for each other or like you never see the like interviewing, like actually interviewing them outside of like this aesthetic of homeless- if that makes sense, like this like ' oh like they're so like minimalistic, like they live outside, duhduhduhduhduh.’ Like outside of that, their actual stories and the things that they've been through, you don't see the news really airing that. You see the news airing crime and people killing each other and but you also don't, even when they do that, they don't ever go into why people in low communities often turn to that, to killing each other, to stealing or to whatever. It never goes deeper than that, it's just that surface level. So if you don't have that passion to learn more about why people are doing the things that they're doing, it's just like of course you're gonna think a certain way, you know. Like you kinda have to do it yourself or you have to be raised upon certain beliefs, certain core beliefs and that's the frustrating part I think.

A: Right, that's the challenging part because if you aren't raised that way, what sparks that inquiry?

M: Right. right. Like what you learn as a kid, you take with you forever and you can of course un-learn it but it's so hard, so hard to un-learn things. I'm still unlearning toxic behaviors and thought patterns and stuff like that. So, trying to have that dialogue with people who have been raised around everybody that thinks alike as well, that thinks that same you know and is pushing the same things, its difficult and its actually very emotionally taxing as well, which is why I think if you're privileged in any sort of way, you should be the one advocating for homeless people not them advocating for themselves because I can't even imagine trying to defend your own humanity to people that just refuse to see it.

A: Wow, that's a really good point, that's a really good point.

M: yeah

A: Maybe returning back to SOS for a little bit, just as a sight. I'd be curious to hear your thoughts on the title, Safe Outdoor Spaces. What do the words in that title mean to you?

M: Safe Outdoor Space, to be honest when I first got this job, I kept forgetting what SOS even meant ( laughter)

A: There's so many acronyms in this world.

M: I know, I was like SOS, I, like my family would ask me ' so what is SOS?' and Id be like ' I don't know, make up something, I don't know' but I think it's the word that for me like in my mind that is most emphasized in that is safe and that doesn't just mean, safe from assault or murder or whatever, that means emotionally safe as well, that means being safe from oppressive forces like the police or from you know people that just report stuff just cause you look suspicious or whatever. So like the word safe is like, I feel like in here, it's definitely emphasized as something that is multi-dimensional, it's not just physical, it's like you need to feel safe enough to talk to us about what's going on with you. You need to feel safe enough to come to us if you're struggling with something, you need to feel safe enough to let us know if you need help with anything. So, I think that all the staff tries our best to build these relationships with everybody in here so that they feel emotionally, mentally safe to share things with us.

A: In what ways do you think that's connected to the sense of community you were talking about earlier?

M: Yeah, honestly, I think one thing that does need to be worked on in here is just communication in general. But I would say that, when you feel safe, when you feel able to be yourself, that in itself makes it so much easier to talk to somebody else or to connect with somebody new or you know because it gives you that kind of security and confidence that you need to put yourself out there, as well. And I think that when everybody here doesn't feel like they're being judged for whatever has happened in their past, whatever situations they've been in, if they've been to prison or not, like when you're not, when you're in a space where everybody kind of has some of the same experiences and isn't judging you, isn't looking at you for what you've been through or what you've done, I mean, that in itself automatically builds a community, like that automatically makes people kinda trust each other, a little bit more. Like you know what I've been through, like you kinda know what I've been through, like and even if you don't, you're not judging that ' I used to use drugs or I was in prison or I hit somebody or you know, whatever. It's just, it's so important, so important to feel safe before you have, before you can call something a community, you know?

A: And I'm wondering, you said, It's one of the things I think, I think you said people can work on or needs to be worked on, is communication. Do you mean residents or staff or all of the above?

M: I think everybody. I think that, I mean, it's not just an in our site problem, it's an everybody problem but I think specifically in our site, I think if we could learn to, learn how to communicate in a way that's effective, we could get so much done and we could resolve so many little conflicts here and there, that just like don't need to be blown up, don't need to be escalate. Like if we just talk to each other, you know. If you just talk to the person you have an issue with, but you know learn how to approach it in a way that's not like attacking or accusatory then like, just like so many problems can be solved.

A: Do you have an example of a small problem, that kind of exploded due to the communication? Let me pick among the obvious (laughter)

M: Ok yeah, I'll do a recent one.

A: Ok. Yeah sure. So, there's a group of members that at night, they have more energy. However, we do have quiet hours from like 10 to 8 in the morning is what's consider quiet hours cause you know people have to work, get up for work but there's a group of people that um they like to, they're night owls, they love to joke, play music, do stuff like that at night and they do so in the back there. And I got here for work one day and I just was flooded with Micaela that people in the back they just duhduduhdhdhu, I couldn't sleep at all, duhduhdudh, but they didn't tell the people in the back that, they weren't like ' hey can you please quiet down like I'm trying to sleep.' they told me that and I find that I'm often the messenger for certain things. So I've been trying to emphasize like ' you guys need to talk to each other' because like I don't know if you've ever been in a situation where it's like somebody has an issue with you but you hear it from everybody else except for the person who has an issue with you

A: Terrible, yeah

M: It makes it so much more irritating.

A: It's impossible not to be angry at that.

M: Right. right. It's not good for anybody, it doesn't get anything done, honestly. It's just gossip. So I've been kind of encouraging that we have mediated conversations. So like staff can just sit in and be like ' ok y'all talk it out' you know so make sure it remains you know, a respectful and like safe kind of thing for them but yeah I've been just emphasizing that we all talk to each other because of that one situation, I mean it's still something that people are irritated about days later cause they have yet to like communicate they just like send like dirty looks at each other from across the site and I'm like, we're adults you know like at some point we have to break out of that, that taking everything really personally and just be like ' hey if you don't like something that somebody does, let them know in a way that's respectful. Like it's entirely possible. It doesn't seem possible because you're so mad, you know, and I guess that's one thing that I appreciate that people here have been doing as well is just knowing that when they're getting mad, recognizing that emotion and not choosing to act on that emotion right in that moment is something that I've noticed that everybody's been working on doing as well. But yeah, eventually there needs to some communication because then it's just built up tension in the air. I mean that situation, I mean stuff between staff, like it's just, there's built up tension that just does not need to be there and can block certain opportunities to connect with each other at times as well. So, yeah, communication, I'm stressing that, big time, big time.

A: Yeah, I mean, I wish people elsewhere in the world stressed it as much as you're stressing it.

M: Yeah, yeah.

A: It'd be helpful.

M: Right, wouldn't it?

A: I know this, you've only, not only, you've been working here since June. So when COVID was well underway, I'm wondering how you're seeing COVID continue to affect residents here, you know and not necessarily like the virus itself but the city's response to COVID and shutdowns, things like that ?

M: Response, lack of response ( Laughter) Yeah that's a really good question. I think that honestly the effects of COVID in this pandemic and the way that we've handled it are going to affect people in low income communities for years to come because, I mean, the whole reason why we or it seems like the whole reason why we even took off the mask mandate and you know went off lockdown was for the economy. So basically for money, for profit, not for actual people's wellbeing and I mean, at the beginning of COVID there are like 'Ok we're gonna fire all of y'all' just two months later be like ' Ok we're opening up again. We're hiring new people'. Right and it's hard enough to get a job. It's so hard to get a job. Like even if you're somebody who has housing, who has all this other stability it's still so hard and frustrating to be employed and the interview process and all of that, it's just at some point it can get hopeless as well. So, I think that the effect of COVID and people just being laid off, re-entering the workforce, re-entering society after that is like, I mean an unprecedented challenge, like we could have never prepared or predicted that. Well I guess we could've prepared but (laugh) we couldn't have predicted like how hard it was going to be for people to be so social beings again after COVID and there's still that fear there, especially with this delta variant now, ummm, there's still that fear there of being in public spaces and you know people that aren't homeless are still have that fear of like because they're unhoused, they're probably not vaccinated so let me not get anywhere near them. That's another thing like now we're straying further from each other because of COVID and because it wasn't handled right and because you know like people just make assumptions about everybody when basically everybody in here is vaccinated, surprise. So yeah I don't know I just think it's like on a social level it's just hard, like what do you even tell somebody? Like, oh just, just go get a job, just go do it, after what like over a year of not really having that kind of, not being in that like professional like workspace, like having to redo it all over again, it's...and after a year that cannot be described as relaxing and restful?

M: Right, right. I mean like it wasn't like the whole year we were like sitting on our ass like it was like the whole year we were worrying. The whole year we had family members dying because of COVID, friends dying because of COVID, like, I don't know if you remember like in March like the beginning of lockdown how all the aisles in the stores were like, everybody was just like hoarding supplies

A: Yeah, punching, fist fights

M: Punching each other in the store, you know, like, the lack of supplies, the lack of resources in that beginning stage was just insane and I'm sure people are still traumatized from that and people still do it to this day like try to like empty out an aisle, like, delta variant, Imma get all this toilet paper right now, like

A: Not again

M: Right, not again (laughs) I'm gonna need all this toilet paper.

A: Clearly didn't learn what we were suppose to learn from that which was don't hoard

M: right, right don't hoard. so, yeah, so that just, that entire mess, it's just so many aspects of life that has changed for us and you put that on top of being unhoused, I mean like, and then like we're like out here, trying to help them but like there's just, it's just an overwhelming amount of unhoused people at this point, like it's overwhelming and it's ridiculous and it's so upsetting. Like, I used to cry when I would drive through Denver, like metro area cause I would just like 'oh my god, like this is crazy' you can see it, you can visually see how many more people are on the streets now.

A: Along those lines, what do you think about Denver's response to COVID and particularly COVID and homelessness?

M: I don't like the Mayor (laughter), straight up. I read some documents that they emailed us the other day about the initiative that they're taking for homelessness and how much money they're actually going to pour into helping but my thing is, they're still doing sweeps, they're still displacing people from (laughs) , I mean they're still taking people's stuff, they're still arresting people, they're still criminalizing homelessness. As long as all of that stuff is happening, to me, it's like, it doesn't matter. As long as you're still making people like shit for being homeless for something that they cannot control and you're not really helping them directly, it still doesn't matter to me, you know, and the mayor had made a comment about how he, he saw what it was like to be homeless for like four hours, he like, he like went out there like on the street and like pretended like he was homeless for like four hours and he was like ' ok I'm gonna go home'.

A: Was that the Aurora guy or was it Hancock?

M: Noooooo, yeah that was the Aurora guy, that was the Aurora guy, sorry. I live in Aurora right now ( laughter) yeah and like right after he said he was just like ' yup you guys can't have any tents on the sidewalk, we're gonna do sweeps"

A: Wasn't he like ' it's not a problem, everyone out here is choosing to be' or something like that?

M: Yes, 100%. So I think when we have people in power that have that kind of umm thought process and ideology, it's, it's gonna change the way things are handled in general. I'm not entirely like educated on everything that Denver did in response to COVID, specifically. Really what I was learning about was the most extreme cases like Texas, where you could just tell like they just don't care about their people there at all. Denver in particular though, I'm not entirely sure of everything they did or didn't do in response to COVID.

A: If you had power, you do have power, but if you had like you know policy making power, enacting policy making power, what would you do more of, less of, change to better support people experiencing homelessness?

M: First of all, I wouldn't have the police be involved in the, anything to do with unhoused people, or anything to do with people experiencing mental illness issues, anything to do with people experiencing drug addiction issues. I wouldn't even like attempt to criminalize those things because we can obviously see that, that's not making anything better at all. In fact, it might actually be making it worse. I would, I feel like, first of all, the cost of living, something needs to happen. There needs to be some sort of support for people that are looking to rent a house or looking to just get an apartment like a studio or whatever. And I know that Denver, as a city, is so gentrified, that the cost of living is just, straight up, if it was on a graph, it would just go straight up because of how many people are moving here. I would prioritize unhoused people, first of all. I would prioritize them over everybody because quite frankly they need to be prioritized, they cannot be set aside, it's literally life or death for them, for a lot of them. So, I think like in terms of policy making, I feel like nobody would like me and I feel like they would try to start a revolution (Laugh) because I would just have the most insane like radical like policies like I would just be like yeah you can't throw out food, like if your, if your a restaurant, I'd try to enforce like a way to like ummm preserve the food cause you know like after the day's over they have to throw it away, it's like a federal law that they have to throw it away. And that's, that hurts, that hurts.

A: It hurts me too. I've been in places where they'll just like leave food on the railings at night.

M: oooooh, really

A: So that, you know, if someone happens to walk by and take it

M: Yeah, right, it's not, like they just took it. That's what I would do if I was a restaurant owner, I'd just be like...' oh my god this doughnut just fell out of my hand, that's so crazy'

A: And into yours

M: Right and into yours, oh my god that totally wasn't me. Yeah and I would support local, small businesses in doing that, I think that people want to do certain things but they have this belief that if they do it, then, if they don't if they aren't selfish and everything falls apart, so I, what I think that our government needs to be doing is actually providing support to people and not just being like 'figure it out, good luck, umm here's like 1000 dollar stimulus' once every like , its not even a consistent thing and you have to be under certain things to have it. Like we live in Denver, what does that do for any of us really?

A: It's like 21 days of rent

M: Right, if that, shoot, that's like a closet. And I, I think it's interesting how they're building so many like new like apartment complexes. You can already tell like I'm not gonna be able to afford that.

A: You can tell who they're for

M: Yeah, you can tell who they're for and I think that if we're gonna build new apartment complexes they need to be, first of all native and black unhoused people need to be housed first and foremost, that's like the very least that we could be doing for them, like the very least and second of all, they need to be affordable obviously and if you can't afford it then we need to provide support for that, you know. Like why, why is our, why is our focus all on getting new people to come here when the people that are here, are struggling to survive, isn't that crazy?

A: That is crazy, yeah

M: So yeah, if I was, if I was in a place of political power, everybody would hate me and everybody would think I was the crazy lady

A: I would vote for you Micaela

M: Thank you so much

A: You have my vote

M: They would just be like ' what are you talking about, that's never been done'. In fact, why can't we do it? Let's just do it right now. They'd be like get out, you don't know how this works.

A: Well maybe along those lines, and we just have a few more questions here, this kind of summarizes a lot of what you said but thinking about two people who have never experienced homelessness, talking about homelessness

M: Right

A: What would you want them to know? What are like the few key things they need to know before continuing their conversation

M: Before continuing that conversation, if they're having, if it's two people having a conversation about how to improve homelessness, they need to befriend an unhoused person. That would be the first tip I would say. Get to know the people that you're talking about because they're not objects, they're not animals in a zoo, they are people and I promise you, a lot of them are really friendly and they'd be willing to talk to you about their experiences and everything. So, first of all, I'd be like, get an unhoused person in the room, in the conversation with you because it will give you a lot of perspective and they'll be able to tell you what's true and what's not true and obviously there's so many different stories that probably contradict each other but I mean I think even just having that perspective, that voice in there, can change the entire conversation. Another thing I would say is to never assume that somebody's path to homelessness is the same. People become homeless because of so many different things, eviction, just got out of prison, didn't have that support, house burnt down, didn't have like ample insurance or whatever. There are so many ways that you can be unhoused

Individual enters the trailer : Anybody here?

A: Do you want me to pause it?

M: No, you're good. There's just so many ways. So I would say

(knock on door)

M: Oop

A: I'll pause it

M: So yeah, back to our regularly scheduled program. I would also, like I said, there's not just one path to homelessness. I would say don't ever rule anything out, don't rule anyone out for you know that possibility because it's really kind of insane the stories you'll hear of how people ended up on the streets. It is insane and yeah there's just so many different ways. The last thing I would say is, I mean this is not that different from the second one, just to never assume anything about anyone in general but especially when you're talking about people experiencing homelessness, never assume that you know how they fell into that or fell into addiction or how they went prison or because if you're really, I mean, if you're having this conversation, you should also be knowledgeable about the systemic things that are going on, that kinda force people down that pipeline of like go to prison, then become homeless, you know. You should be aware of the blockages that certain people have and the lack of opportunities that certain people have before you're even entering that conversation because then if you're not, if you're not at least trying to learn about that, then it's like why are you having that conversation because then you're just gonna go in circles like ' oh they should just get a job'. Well if you don't know why it's so hard then like, the conversation's gonna last five seconds. So, just try to learn about, just try to learn about, everything that people in low income communities go through, their schooling, even like down to their education, like their outdated books in school and like how hard it is for some of them to even get to school in the first place and how that affects the rest of their lives and what they, you know, if they turn to gang violence or not and if they turn to homelessness eventually. So yeah just try to learn about the context of everything instead of being like "homelessness is this, this, this and that". Just be open to learning, I guess. You don't have to know everything but be open to that possibility.

A: And I'm thinking. I'm thinking about context and open to learning. You told me earlier that you're a writer and I'm wondering how you think of writing as being a tool for these kinds of things and particularly maybe your own story, own perspective. Also thinking about like, your decision to donate your story today, to speak with us today. How you see story fitting in?

M: The most important lessons in my opinion are passed down through stories and storytelling and writing. So just with that alone, I think it's important that we, that we encourage that kind of art form. I feel like writing is so like, like taboo in people's minds, like I can't write, I'm not a good writer. I always try to tell people ' Who Cares?'. This is not for anybody else but for you and I guarantee you like regardless of how messed up your grammar is when you write, like you're gonna produce something beautiful because it's all subjective. Like art is all subjective, it doesn't have to be like this perfect kind of thing. In fact, it's all imperfect and that 's what makes it so powerful, you know. I think in terms of this, (Laughter) I don't know, I've been journaling a lot. So, I've been reflecting on my job and myself and if you like look through any of my books, especially like the critical race theory books ' annotation, annotation, annotation'. Like I'm the type of person to write in my books. Sorry but I am, like I write in my books. So, I think it's just really cool to get the thoughts that I've written down and the thoughts that have just been kinda swimming around in my head, out because people don't really ask the questions that you do, you know and that's why I asked if your a journalist because I just kind of heard like some of the questions that you were saying and I was like ' she's good at that, is she a journalist?'

A: I was worried you were just gonna be like ' those are lame questions'

M: No girl, no, no

A: Well actually speaking of that, the last question is , if you were doing this interview what questions would you ask that I didn't ask? You set that up very perfectly.

M: Oh my god, ok. Hmmmm. One thing that I've always kind of been like curious to know if people notice, is like, just asking I guess in terms of this site as well ' Do you think that the demographic of homeless people out on the streets of Denver are being reflected in this site as well?' Yeah I think the statistics are like #1 black people and natives

A: Are you talking about at this site or on the streets?

M: On the streets

A: Gotcha

M: And so I think that can also lead into a conversation about who, who's getting resources, who's getting opportunities as well, you know because even though, you know they're all out on the streets, they all have those struggles. It's a different kind of struggle when you add race, when you add gender into it, when you add sexuality, all these kinds of things, when you add all of that into it, it's just, it's different.

A: Do you think that the demographics here are representative?

M: I don't but I think you know, the way that our process is, you kind of have to have some sort of like resource, like you have to have a case worker to make a referral. So I think that might be why it's not reflecting it as much as I would like it to. We used to have a trans woman that was in here and I really loved that and I wish we had more trans people because I know that they're out there, I know that they are but yeah, I, I definitely wish it was more diverse but like I said we're not all the way full, we still have chances for that, but yeah, hopefully, eventually we'll have more different groups of people with different kinds of their own experiences and their own kinds of oppression, cause you know it's important to know different kinds of people and to help different kinds of people as well. If you're just helping like one kind of person, it's like, you're not really that useful to the outside world

A: That's true, it's perpetuating the systems we already have

M: Right, exactly, yep

A: Amazing. Is there anything else you would add?

M: No (laughter)