Interview of Brian Biery
UCLA Library, Center for Oral History Research, University of California, Los Angeles Interview of Brian Biery

Transcript

SESSION ONE July 24, 2014

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AOKI:

This is Kyoko Aoki. I'm here with the UCLA Center for Oral History Research. I'm interviewing Brian Biery today, July 24, 2014. We're at Flintridge Center in Pasadena, California. So could we start by you telling me when and where you were born and a little bit about your early life?

00:02:46

BIERY:

So my name is Brian Biery, and I was born here in Pasadena, California, and growing up here—well, I guess a little bit of history is that my grandparents both moved here in the 1920s, and so our family's been here for three generations. As with many people who came to California, the reason, of course, was the weather, you know, better climate, and then also better economy. So my grandfather on my dad's side ended up being asked by a wealthy Minnesotan to be chauffeur, gardener, handyman at his large estate on Grand Avenue, with is the street one over from Orange Grove Boulevard, and, in fact, it's located right behind the Wrigley Mansion, or the Tournament of Roses House. So my grandfather drove out here, I think the first time was, like, 1920 or 1921, in a Model-T Ford, so you can imagine what the roads were like then. And came out, worked for almost a year, went back, and then brought my grandmother out, and they lived behind the house over the carriage house, or the garage, in an apartment, and that's where my uncle and my dad were born. Ultimately, my family roots are Swiss, and so he was very cautious with his money, and he saved up enough so that eventually he was able to buy a house kind of in East Pasadena by Marshall High School. So that was probably, I think, when my dad was around eight or nine, and they grew up there, and then my other uncle was born there. That's the house that I was familiar with. It's on Galbreth Road.

As we were growing up, one of the reasons why I mention my grandparents, and then on both sides, is that they were really an important part of our lives. So every week we would—because another important feature is that my parents separated when I was about seven years old and divorced soon after, so our grandparents were really important. So usually on Sunday nights we would go to one side of the family, my dad's side, and then Tuesday or Wednesday, maybe Thursday, we would go over to my mother's side of the family, and actually didn't live too many blocks apart. Of course, my parents met because they were in the same neighborhood and they went to the same school. Kind of an interesting tidbit is my mother's best friend is the wife of my father's best friend, so the four of them were best friends growing up, and then they ended up marrying each other's best friend, and they're still really good friends today. My dad, last weekend, went to his best friend's birthday party in Arizona, and they turned eighty years old. So they celebrated their birthdays. And then my mother and the wife are still good friends, so the rest of us didn't go, but my mom called them up afterward and wished them a happy birthday. So, I guess, a salient point for me growing up was we grew up in what I would say middle-class or working-class neighborhood, and our school system was pretty good at that time. And then when I was approaching the fifth grade, there was a court decision and it mandated that school segregation would be ended. So our city, our school district, was asked to, I guess, be the first school district west of the Mississippi to integrate. So we had what was termed at that time forced busing.

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AOKI:

What year was this?

00:07:57

BIERY:

It was in early seventies. So it was interesting because overnight we were going to the school that's around the corner from our house, and then the following year we were bused to a school up near Altadena, which actually turned out to be not as dramatic of a change as some of my friends, who were sent across town to other schools, but it really caused an upheaval in the school district, such that one of the outcomes was what was described at that time as white flight. So numerous, in particular, white families pulled their kids out of the school district. Most of my friends stayed in. We all stayed in, and we all went to middle school together and then high school together. It changed the pathway of my education a little bit, but I don't think it negatively affected the quality. But what it did, and we look back when I spend time with some of my friends from high school, is it was actually a pretty unique time, in that especially by the time we were in high school we had been integrated several years, and it was a pretty peaceful experience. We had friends across the board, and when you look at our senior yearbook pages, it's a really diverse student body, and while the white population was still slightly the majority at that time, I would say it was probably just a little over a third of the students were white, and then close to a third were African American, and a little bit less than a third were Latino, and then we had some Asian students and significant Japanese population and then a few Chinese and Korean. We really all lived together pretty well, and it's demonstrated in the photographs. It wasn't really that race was much of an issue.

Another area that I think is relevant or salient to this conversation is I was in the Boy Scouts, so I think that nurtured a sense for giving back to the community. It was originally Cub Scouts at our elementary school, and then when I matriculated on, I moved into the Boy Scouts at the age of eleven. Our Boy Scout troop was rather unique because it also was very diverse, as opposed to many of the other troops were either all white or all Japanese or all African American. Ours had a little bit of everything, and that was the result, I think, in part of our leadership, Boy Scout leader, and then Boy Scoutmaster, and our assistant Scoutmaster. My uncle was the assistant Scoutmaster for pretty much all the years I was in Scouting, and he was a teacher here in Pasadena as well as ended up being a principal. He, as well as the Scoutmaster, felt like it was important for us to have a diverse group of young people and then kids who wouldn't normally have the opportunity to be in the outdoors. So it was, I would say, a wonderful experience, and we got to know nature here locally up in these mountains and then in the desert on the other side of the San Gabriel Mountains. Ultimately, we would go every summer up to the Sierra Nevada range and do a weeklong trip, and we did that, I think, six times while I was a Boy Scout. We were able to hike in the High Country, and one year it actually in August—that's when we usually took the trip—it actually snowed on us, which was a little bit disconcerting for fifteen-year-olds in the middle of the wilderness, but—

AOKI:

Right, growing up in Southern California, probably never saw it before.

BIERY:

Yeah. So, as with anyone, there's certainly more to say, but that's a little bit about how my upbringing here.

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AOKI:

And what did your parents do?

BIERY:

My father's been in finance his whole life, and originally when we first moved here, he was a CPA. So he worked at a firm—well, it was actually a business, and he was the accountant for that business in Monterey Park. I think the business had something to do with office supplies, but I was pretty small when that happened. By the time my parents separated or certainly by the divorce, he was working in city government. He made a shift to public finance. So he started off as the assistant or one of the deputy finance directors for the City of Monterey Park and then became the finance director for a short time and then moved to various other cities, including Fontana and Thousand Oaks, and he's currently still working as the finance director out in the Thousand Oaks area for one of the other small towns. My mother originally, especially during those early years, was a stay-at-home mom. She had three kids under the age of—was it five or four? So she had her hands full. But then after the divorce, she ended up going back to school. She went to Pasadena City College and then she went to Cal Poly Pomona and ultimately went to—I believe it was Mount St. Mary's graduate school, and she earned a master's degree in dance movement therapy. So as an artist therapist, she ended up working—she really has had two jobs. She's done other things, odds and ends, but two main jobs. One was first with Five Acres, which is a school for abused and neglected children. It was started over a hundred years ago as a school, or as an orphanage, actually, but has evolved into being foster care and then assisted living and education for abused children and neglected. So she worked there for about fifteen years, and then she also, for a longer period of time, has worked for the Armory Center for the Arts, and she teaches. She still teaches classes over there in their dance class curriculum, whatever that section is. So she's working this week, I think, giving a class.

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AOKI:

You mostly grew up, you stayed with your mother in Pasadena?

BIERY:

Yeah. I think that custody rights have changed over the years, and battles, but it was more the norm at that time for the mother to have primary custody and then I think their agreement was for us to be with my father one weekend a month, and then he would try to attend some of our school and out-of-school activities. I was involved in sports, a lot of sporting activities, and some dramatic arts, and then, of course, Boy Scouts, so he tried to be involved in those too.

AOKI:

What were their reactions to the integration of schools?

00:16:26

BIERY:

It was kind of interesting, because, you know, as a child, you don't really remember much of their comments about the situation. I think we knew right away that it was going to be different and it was going to be potentially challenging, but I don't think they ever considered seriously trying another avenue, and really the white flight really took off in the eighties and nineties. I think that's coupled also with a rise in crime, which was a result of the development of gangs and all around use of cocaine and the arrival of crack. So I think the schools were perceived as being less safe. For our family, though, the hard part was—and a lot of families struggle with this today—is the cost. So Mom was going to Pasadena City College and Cal Poly Pomona at that time, and Dad was paying some child support, but certainly not enough for tuition for essentially three kids at a private school, so I don't think they really ever considered it.

One strategy that my mother investigated was we grew up in a section of town that is a Pasadena zip code and Pasadena address, but technically it's a county strip of land, and there a couple of islands like that in Pasadena. The largest ones are in East Pasadena and they're kind of on the way to Arcadia and then San Marino on the south of San Gabriel, and also there are, I would say, just isolated swatches of county which had never been incorporated, and yet we're a part of the Pasadena School District. So one strategy that some of the parents thought of, especially in our little island, was to be absorbed by San Marino. So a couple of times I think they pulled together petitions whereby San Marino would annex that land and then we'd all be eligible to go to school in San Marino, but San Marino didn't want that to happen. And I don't know now if kind of an irony of that scenario is that with gentrification changes in home values all over the state, of course, but especially in Southern California, those properties, many of them are similar value to ones you'd find in San Marino. So they've been utilized and improved and some have been expanded and enlarged, so they actually would fit in fairly well with San Marino's, I guess, socioeconomic status. But no one was ever able to pull that off, so they've stayed separate. And another option, for different reasons, was to be annexed by the City of Pasadena so that all services from Pasadena could be utilized. But the people who lived there voted that down, so they remain as an island.

It's odd, too, because they're serviced, especially for police, by L.A. County Sheriff, and the nearest sheriff's station is, I don't know, six, seven miles away, many further in Temple City, so it's not like you'd be able to get a lot of service really quickly. And my mother still lives there too.

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AOKI:

So do you remember how that change was presented to you as a school-aged boy and what your response was the first year you went into your new school?

BIERY:

Well, I don't really remember it being presented to me. It was just sort of understood that it was going to change, and I'm sure we talked about it in class with all of our friends, or even out of class, but I don't really remember us saying one way or another. What I do remember really well is the first day of class at the new school, or the first couple of weeks, I mean, having a different student body, in particular going to a different school, but a different student body and then completely different teachers and then some of the adjustments that were made because of that. But it was interesting because it was still really balanced. It wasn't like then all of a sudden you were thrown into an inner-city school that was predominantly one group or another, and I think the photographs would back me up on this, too, that we ended up being a fairly diverse crowd of young people and evenly represented. Again, as with high school, there were issues here and there. I can remember a few fights and squabbles and some being specifically about race, but because kids have disagreements, I'm not sure that it was necessarily excessively or abnormally high compared to any other urban school. Maybe a more suburban type of experience would have less fights between students, but ours—and I guess an example was it wasn't like there were fights every single day, you know.

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AOKI:

Sure.

BIERY:

And there were beefs between students that weren't necessarily racial, but because some kids of all backgrounds were bullies or just mean, they had intentions of harassing other students. I can think of a few right now, and they were of different ethnic groups.

AOKI:

So with the Boy Scouts, aside from the nature, outdoor activities, what other activities did you participate in, that group?

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BIERY:

Well, a large part of the Boy Scouts is learning about the outdoors, but several other components are really important. One is certainly developing kind of an internal moral compass, so thinking about concepts about being obedient or reverent or respectful or trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, kind, courteous, all of those. We especially being—again, I would consider us to be an urban Boy Scout troop with a lot of the issues that urban centers face. With that and the fact that we were a diverse Scout troop, much of what we did was about the growth and development of young men. And then you throw into the mix the challenges of being outdoors, obviously it's part of the structure or the mechanism by which people grow, but then that also, because of the challenges it provides, especially because—I told you it snowed, so that particular night we had decided, instead of people sleeping in individual tents, which at that time we had kind of a minimalist camping, so they were called tube tents, and they were plastic. It was a cylinder that opened up, and then you put a string through it, and there was adequate room for you to sleep one person in each one. But what we did that night was we created a roof out of these plastic tents, and so there were at least five or six of us in a row sleeping under the tarp that we had created.

The challenge came is that since none of our tents were large enough to cover all of us—and there might have been six or seven—we had to layer them. So we had one, then another, then another, and another. So what happened was the snow gathered on the roof, on the tarp, and as the weight gained and then because of the lack of resistance on plastic, it slid to the openings between the layers and then slid down and fall on top of us. At first, you don't notice it because it's just snow, but after an hour or so, it melts, so we had puddles either on or under our sleeping bags of really cold water. So those are the types of experiences that challenge you and force you to respond, because you could panic and get up and be screaming and yelling, or you can try to figure out how to, as a group, fix the leak, dry everybody out, get some clean or dry clothes, and then try to dry out the sleeping bags or use some other system for keeping people warm, and you do all that with flashlights. So I think it's a really good mechanism by which young people are assisted to get to know themselves and then how to interact with people around them. Also the Boy Scouts, it kind of goes back to the camping, we did—they're called Camporees, and it's a group of—it's like 100 different Boy Scout troops get together in one campground, and then there's competitions in knot-tying and stargazing and using wood or starting fires and all sorts of interesting things. We participated in one of those each year.

But another aspect was community service. One of the big projects we had was collecting newspapers. My uncle, he was a recycling king before recycling was a fad or was accepted by the common culture of our society. So we recycled newspaper, and we did newspaper drives, and we raised money with newspaper and then eventually added aluminum cans. Those weren't really the public service projects, but they were the mechanism by which we could raise a couple hundred bucks and then conduct a community service project, and we had numerous variety of those which were pretty fun. But that's another aspect of the Boy Scouts that was valuable, so the teamwork concept, giving back to the community, personal growth and development, and then the learning about the outdoors and protecting nature.

AOKI:

So you continued through your high school years?

BIERY:

Mm-hmm.

AOKI:

Were you in public school through middle school and high school?

BIERY:

Mm-hmm.

AOKI:

Are there certain subjects in school that you enjoyed in particular?

BIERY:

Well, I liked pretty much all of them. I'm not a real mathematician, so those were probably my least favorite, but history and social studies, English. I read everything I could get my hands on. I think also there were a few electives, too, that were appealing as well, and they were practical. So we had an auto shop, which a lot of schools don't have anymore, and just leaning a little bit how to change the oil or even air filters and oil filters and things like the basics, change a tire. That was all helpful. But I was really involved both a little bit in school government and then several school clubs and then also the school newspaper. But the place where I was most connected in both middle and high school was athletics. So I was on several teams and competed.

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AOKI:

What'd you play?

BIERY:

By the time I was in high school, I was on the water polo team, the basketball team, and the baseball team. Being at a smaller public high school afforded me the opportunity to be on all three. If you go to one of the huge public high schools with three or four thousand students with so much competition, it's hard to be a generalist. You have to pick one or the other in order to compete. But I was able to do all of them.

AOKI:

Can you talk a little bit about your transition from high school to college?

BIERY:

Yeah. So I think one of the challenges, especially if you come from a family that is not intact traditionally, then a lot of the navigation ends up falling on the child or the student. So, fortunately, I was in AP classes, so college prep was in my consciousness at an early age, even certainly in middle school, and it was fueled by all my friends too. So all of us in kind of my social group, we were all thinking about where we were going and what we were going to do after high school, not so much career-wise, but absolutely what school we were going to and why and what the advantages would be one way or the other. However, again, it fell on my shoulders to do the research and then the applications, so it's kind of funny, because some of my friends, their kids are graduating from high school now, and so I hear these stories of them applying to seven schools or ten schools, or one of my friend's daughter, she applied to seventeen schools.

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AOKI:

That's a lot of essays.

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BIERY:

I just managed to apply to two, and so it seems like in some ways I was deficient in that area, but then on the other hand, I had a pretty clear idea of where I wanted to go. So it wasn't like I needed to send out all of those. If I had not been accepted, I'm not sure what I would have done. I supposed I would have gone to Pasadena City College and then tried to transfer. But I was accepted, so I just went forward with my favorite, so it wasn't that big of a deal as far as decision-making. But I filled out the applications, I wrote the essays, I then submitted all the financial aid paperwork, and so it was kind of ironic, because I had to go to my mom, in particular, but my dad a little bit, too, for information so I could complete the—now, it's FAFSA, but it was just a financial aid form at that time. I signed myself up for the PSAT and took that, and then the SAT, and knowing what I know now, I probably would have tried to take the SAT twice instead of just once, but I didn't have any idea of what the ramifications were. Then it was a challenge to get organized for all that, but I ended up going to University of California, Santa Barbara, and I started off as a business economics major and found that that wasn't very interesting, supply and demand and inflation and employment. I'm glad I took those classes because I understand those concepts, but for the long run, it wasn't very interesting. So then I shifted to communication studies, so I learned all about everything from mass media and communications, which is what I focused on, to interpersonal communication and small-group communication and nonverbal communication and intercultural or intracultural communication, and it was a really, really good experience.

I ended up adding an extra year because I couldn't get all my coursework done, and I had to go one extra quarter, so I thought, "I might as well just stay a whole year," and so I added a minor and it was in coaching athletics. So I took kinesiology and sports medicine and some other really terrific classes, and that ended up being my first job out of college was coach water polo at the high school where I graduated from, and that ended up becoming a five-year-long coaching tenure in swimming and water polo. And then I coached basketball for a couple of years at Occidental College as an assistant coach, because my head coach had moved on over there and he asked me to help out. So my college experience was very, very positive. It was really, really good.

AOKI:

Did you live on campus?

BIERY:

No. The first year, again because I was doing all of the applying and everything, and so I didn't get right on the housing application early enough, so by the time I applied, all the on-campus housing was full. So there were several off-campus dormitories, so I applied to a couple of them and I was accepted into those, and I picked the one that I liked the best. So I lived in a dorm, but it was off campus, and it was run privately, but under the auspices of the University of California, so they had to follow their rules and regulations. That was a very good experience, too, and they were very clean and well maintained.

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AOKI:

Did you get support from your high school counselors? Was there an infrastructure in place there to assist?

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BIERY:

No. It's pretty funny. I was telling this story recently. I don't know why it came up, but—oh, I know. The work that we do here now, where I am now, the Flintridge Center, deals with prevention, intervention, and so a lot of it is talking about some of these same issues, especially for high school students and the support that they receive. So we're trying to figure out how to shore up deficiencies within the school district and then also in the community so the kids have not only high-quality education but then also high-quality experiences similar to mine with the Boy Scouts. I was at the Boys and Girls Clubs, and I used a couple of the other nonprofits around town, too, as I was growing up, including after-school recreation through the city. So thinking about how to create a nurturing community for all kids, we were in a meeting with some kids because we were working on a project called the Youth Master Plan. Our city, as with many cities, has a plan for lighting, has a plan for street trees, it has a plan for bicycles, it has a plan for seniors, it has a plan for growth and development in Old Pasadena, in Central Pasadena, and East Pasadena, and there are specific plans for those regions as well as even just specific lots. It's got a transportation corridor plan. So it has plans for everything except for kids. So the last year, we've been working on a Youth Master Plan and attempting to create a common vision for prioritizing youth and emphasizing and responding to their needs and holding them as dear and valuable. So it was not last week, but the week before, we had our Youth Master Plan meeting, and one of the students said, "We need more counselors." I said, "So what does that mean?" And she said, "At our high school, I never get to see my counselor, and the counseling load is like one to four hundred students."

Another one of the students chimed in, and she said, "Yeah, I think ours is even higher than that, so like one to five hundred or something." I think at the high school I was at it wasn't that high, but it was probably one to three hundred. So I told them, I said, "I went to high school in this district, too, and in four years, I saw my counselor once, and the only reason why I saw my counselor was when I was a senior and it was right toward the end of the school year, and he just brought me in because he said, "Oh, you're going to receive an award for your academics," or something, "and I just want to let you know and congratulate you and make sure that you—we're going to have a ceremony, and I want you to invite your parents and your grandparents." I said, "Okay, great." So the answer is no, they didn't help with any of that preparation. I think from a distance he was keeping an eye on the fact that I had the right academic preparation for getting into the UC system, but I was tracking it myself, because I wanted to make sure I had the foreign language and the math and the history and all of the right amount, and four years of English and whatever the requirements were. But it wasn't because—at least my counselor wasn't meeting with me about it.

So, yeah, I didn't have that outside support, which is another reason why in the work we do today we try to encourage and make sure that that is developed for the kids. There is a nonprofit here in town that's doing really good work in that arena, and it's called CAP, College Access Plan, and so it has assisted literally hundreds of kids who, it's not that they never would have gone to college, but they're the first in their family to go, many of them, or one of the few in their family to attend college. Probably many of them would have figured it out eventually anyway, but CAP really streamlined the process, assisted them, supported them, and helped prepare them, not only for the applications but then also for actually stepping onto a college campus. Just that little extra help or support is invaluable, and so that they've changed hundreds and hundreds of lives because of it.

AOKI:

So let's talk a bit about your transition from coaching to what happened between your coaching years and coming to Flintridge. What were you doing during those years?

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BIERY:

Well, it's probably not the most fascinating story, but after coaching for five years, and I coached—or it was right around there. I ended up coaching at three different schools. So I started at Blair, I went to Pasadena High School, then I went to South Pasadena High School, and I actually ran the swimming pool there and became the head swim coach for the women's team and the assistant water polo coach. But I'd reached the point where while I really loved coaching, I wanted another challenge, and also it was tough to survive, just because the way I had it structured is in the summertime I was running the swimming pools here in Pasadena, so during almost half the year I had a full-time job. But during the rest of the year, I had to be a substitute teacher and then coach in the afternoon because I couldn't, like, piecemeal the coaching enough to earn, because the coaching salary for each—because I coached water polo in the fall, then it went to basketball at the college, and then I coached in the spring. Each one of those ranged between 1,500 and 2,000 dollars a season, and less than $6,000 a year is not enough to live on.

So after five years, I was getting kind of weary about being broke, but I loved what I was doing and had great experiences with all those youth and young adults. So what I said was, "I want to continue in this field, but I want to try doing it in a different country, learn a different language, experience a different culture, and at the same time try to help some people with their issues." So I conducted research on a variety of international development projects and programs, so there was Catholic Relief Services, there's World Vision, even United Nations, and then there's some like Doctors Without Borders and Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and just taking a look at what they had for either pseudo volunteers or interns and how their projects were set up. And I found that most of them were fairly short-term, it was a few months or even weeks, and you were done. I knew that just in a few months or even six months to a year, that wouldn't be enough, especially when learning another language. So I did some more research and found that the Peace Corps actually has a more significant program and it's two years' long plus three months of training. So based on not only the time period but also what I would be doing and how it was structured and what sorts of requirements they had of me and then also my knowledge and experience, it just seemed like the Peace Corps was the best choice.

So I applied in January, and by July 4th, I was on a plane to Central America and served two years and three months in Guatemala. I was a youth development volunteer, so I continued a lot of the programs that I had worked on here in Pasadena but then also helped them to start a summer camp, some after-school programs, and we even did some hiking and we did a couple of campouts, although those were challenging in a place like Guatemala. I worked with youth groups, or a particular youth group at a church, and did everything from teaching English to teaching health and nutrition and physical education to coaching swimming and basketball. We had a youth basketball team that ended up being very, very good, and so the Guatemalan head coach used me as the technical assistant, and so we ended up touring around Guatemala. And then we actually qualified for Central American Games, and those were held in Guatemala City, and we did really, really well one year. So I was a part of quite a few different projects there. So after those two years, I came back and recognized that—well, I got a job as a Spanish teacher in South Pasadena High School, and I taught six periods a day of Spanish at various levels. Then I was split between the middle school and the high school. I'm not too sure why they set it up that way, but it was pretty demanding. So during the course of that year, I realized that my Spanish was very good, but my knowledge of the grammar and the intricacies of the language, it could be better. So I applied to graduate schools, and, again, I just picked two, and they both accepted me. I wanted to develop my language skills but then also contemplate literature and architecture and politics, history, sociology of Latin American countries as well as their origin in Spain, so I had applied to the Monterey Institute in Northern California and then also to Middlebury College in Vermont, and they both accepted me. The irony is years later they actually merged, and so it's now—

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AOKI:

Oh, did they?

00:52:55

BIERY:

Yeah. It's now one. Monterey Institute is—I guess you would call it a subset or a satellite site for Middlebury College. So I ended up choosing Middlebury and spent a year in Madrid studying—I spent a semester up in Vermont and then the next academic year in Spain, and focused on those subjects and just had an amazing experience. Part of it, too, again is the cultural context. So I'm thinking historically about the relationship between Spain and then the New World, but then also what it's like to live in Latin America and the variety of experiences there and cultures that are represented there. So the literature that we read was fabulous, and I did read some nonfiction, but it was mainly fictional accounts of growth and development, the last five hundred years of the New World. So that was a fabulous experience, and what it's impacted since then is that I've been able to utilize that for a variety of projects that I've been involved with over the years in Latin America. One was the church that my mother belongs to here in Pasadena had a project in Mexico, because some of the staff members were from that community, and there was a flood there back in the nineties. So for ten years after that, every year we would go once and sometimes twice to that small fishing village on the coast of Sinaloa and help everything from with their—they have a medical center. Well, it's not really a medical center. It's more like a medical shack or hut. So helped with that, I helped with the elementary school. We helped to develop a library there and a library system.

The very first time we went down was right after the flood, so we built—I mean, there were dozens of families, maybe hundreds of families, that were affected, but two were selected and we rebuilt their homes. Because they were wooden before and they were completely annihilated by the flood, so we built their cement block houses that are elevated so that if the floods came back, they wouldn't go into their homes, the water wouldn't rise up that high. So that was one project.

AOKI:

What's this town called?

00:55:38

BIERY:

Agua Verde, and it's outside of Mazatlan about an hour south. There have been several other projects. So I've been to Ecuador, went to Colombia last year, Venezuela, and then back to Guatemala a couple of times, conducting research but then also assisting with the human rights programs. The one in Ecuador was really fascinating because there was this group called the Cofán Indians, and they're surrounded by oil territory. So they had carved out as section of land. It's kind of like the Indian reservations here. But the angle that they used, which was successful, was to create a nature—it was protected land or habitat restoration for the waterways and then the animal life in that area, so it's a preservation area. I think it was designated as a conservancy type of a structure, and they were allowed to live there and maintain it. It's thousands of acres, so it's a pretty significant amount of land. But oil companies have set up platforms all around it. Just before we arrived, there was a major standoff where one oil company decided to build a platform inside of the conservancy area, and so the Cofán Indians surrounded the platform and told them to leave. So it was pretty tense, and, fortunately, no one was injured. But through not only international pressure but then also some internal support, they were able to get the oil company to move the platform to just outside the conservancy land.

So I've been a part of groups that are like that that are helping to support human rights of indigenous peoples and communities of lower socioeconomic status throughout Latin America. The trip we went to Colombia last year, Colombia has the largest number of internally displaced people. So many countries, like Syria right now, there's a huge amount of refugees that are going to other countries. What happened in Colombia's case is they didn't move to Venezuela or Brazil, but they just moved to different parts of Colombia. So a good friend of mine, he's a therapist and a theater director and actor, and so we used theater techniques to assist folks in this community that had been about between three and five years ago, so it's pretty recent, kind of ground zero for some of the fighting between guerilla insurgency and the government. But all of that is caused by the whole kind of drug culture and drug war, so some of those kids, their parents have been involved in that fighting. So we were trying to use theater as a therapeutic method for them to deal with their issues, which ranged certainly from low self-esteem and depression to PTSD and those other sorts of results from being in an environment of warfare. So all that is to say is that the Spanish that I learned was or has been extremely beneficial and absolutely I didn't anticipate that, so many applications for speaking multiple languages, but it's been a big, big help. And there are many other examples of that too.

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AOKI:

Just going back for a second, when you were teaching at the Pasadena High School, so you keep coming back to this community. Can you describe any changes or anything that struck you, actually working for the school district at that time?

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BIERY:

Well, I would build it out to not just—and I worked for South Pasadena. When I was a teacher, I worked for South Pasadena High School as a Spanish teacher, and that was after the Peace Corps. I was a coach here in Pasadena School District. But Pasadena, Altadena, and South Pasadena are oftentimes considered—especially Pasadena and Altadena—one community. South Pasadena is a little bit different, largely because of socioeconomic status, and I think there's a real natural pride that South Pasadenans have about their city. But there is still historically, geographically, economically a connection between South Pas and Pasadena, but it's much more obvious and much more fluid between Altadena and Pasadena, as opposed to South Pas. There are several reasons for that, but I won't digress into those. But I think more a part of your question, a couple aspects, one is, they keep coming back. A lot of people are curious because in doing this work oftentimes invariably someone will say, "Well, where were you born?" And I said, "Well, I was born here at Huntington Hospital." For a lot of people, they're surprised, because modern society, especially in the United States—I would say Europe to a certain extent, too, and maybe some of the other economically advanced countries—is that we're transients. We don't really stay in one place. And I have family members who actually are examples of this. One of my cousins last year moved to West Virginia for employment. My brother's been in Colorado for the last ten years because of employment. One of my mother's best friends—and all these people grew up either in Pasadena or nearby, but one of my mother's best friends who lives a couple blocks from here, her daughter lives in Atlanta and her son lives in Dallas, and they grew up here and their spouses grew up here.

So much of it is predicated upon opportunity, and it's a much more fluid opportunity than it ever has been in the history of humankind, even though people have moved back and forth for eons. That having been said, after living in Madrid, after living in Guatemala, after living significant times in Brazil, and being in Mexico numerous, numerous times, and then living in another part of the United States for a few months and then traveling a lot, depending on how you measure quality of life, Pasadena's is pretty darn good. The job I did, which we haven't talked about, after graduate school was working for the city's Neighborhood Connections Office, so I was a neighborhood community organizer for the city, and as a result, there's an annual conference that Neighborhoods USA sponsors. So I've been all over the country. I've been to Portland; I've been to Spokane; I've been to Minneapolis; I've been to Little Rock; I've been to Chattanooga; I've been to Houston; I've been to Hollywood, Florida; Hampton, Virginia. One of the years it was in Madison, Wisconsin; Phoenix, Arizona. What's the capital of New York? So I've been to all of those cities.

Again, on a compare-and-contrast basis, there's some great things about some of those other cities that Pasadena absolutely doesn't have, like Chattanooga has a beautiful river through the middle of it. Spokane does too. Spokane has a gorgeous river. And Minneapolis does too. And Spokane's has spectacular waterfalls right in the downtown area, and then what they've done is they've created a Riverwalk on both sides, and it's really, really pretty. It's gorgeous. And they have Gonzaga College there, or university, and there's many, many amenities. But everything considered, because Pasadena has many attributes that these other places don't have, this is a pretty darn good place to live, I feel. So since I was born here and my mother's still here and my aunts and uncles and my cousins, I just feel like you kind of bloom where you're planted. So if you're going to draw a line in the sand and say I'm going to try to make something of my life but then also make the world a little bit better place, then what better place than where you were born, and especially if it's a pretty good place to start off with, but that could be guided and directed and assisted to be even better. So I decided after I was done with the Peace Corps and then graduate school and living in Europe for a year and on the East Coast, I came back and I made a decision that I was going to—because out of the previous five, six, almost seven years, I was kind of in and out, and I was gone a lot. And I decided that I had kind of two little goals, and one was to spend more time with family and more time with friends here. So I ended up applying for jobs in the area that were focused on community organizing or on youth development or giving back to the community in some way, because I knew I didn't want to work for a corporation, so I applied.

It took me three months, but twenty-five different applications and over a dozen interviews later, I finally landed a job with the city in this Neighborhood Connections Office as an outreach worker and community organizer. But I felt like this was a place where I really wanted to try to make a difference and give back to, because it had done a lot for me and because I saw that there were places of improvement. So that kind of leads to the second part of your question, which is seeing change or growth or difference. There's dramatic difference from when I was growing up here, and it's on multiple levels. It's everything from the litany of services that you can access to an abundance of arts to educational activities, and it just seems like it's richer, it's more full today than it ever has been. I feel like this community has a pretty dynamic political climate in the sense that there are many people who are involved here locally and a wide variety of issues and topics, everywhere from last week's spaying and neutering of pets to two or three weeks ago bicycle master plan and mobility and then the issues we're working on which are intervention, prevention, and reintegration. I like that, too, that there's a vibrant community. I know that if I would move—and I won't name any names because maybe I'm wrong, but there are other parts of the state and certainly of the country where there's less involvement, activism, civic engagement, advocacy, and committed individuals. I think there are some places in this country where people just sort of hunker down and just try to ride it out because they don't think that they have a voice or they don't think that there's a role for them or they're actually either forced out of the political process or shut off.

So here, while again it's not perfect, there's a fair amount of social justice and activism and advocacy. One of the examples of that, which this leads back to my grandparents' era, is that from the very beginning Pasadena was a place of community organizing, and we have a couple of examples. Our library system is one of the oldest in the L.A. region, but for a city this size, we have ten branch libraries for 140,000 people, and I don't think there's any city in L.A. County that has that kind of reach. We have our own municipal water and power company and district, so we don't buy from MWD or Metropolitan Water District or from L.A. Water and Power, because we're independent. We don't get all of our energy and our water locally, but we manage it all, and that's over 100 years old. We also have our own health department. There are only three cities in the state that have that, which is Berkeley, Long Beach, and Pasadena. All of the rest of municipalities utilize for public health county systems so L.A. County Public Health or Orange County Public Health or whatever. So those were started by individuals over 100 years ago, like 1900, 1890s, who were forward-thinking visionaries who got involved at an early time to say that these will make the quality of life in our community better for the residents here. Another example of that is that we have—and depending on who you ask and how you count, but we have hundreds, literally hundreds of nonprofits in this city. There's not a greater concentration. We think that Santa Monica may have ultimately more than us, but as far as per capita, the concentration of nonprofit organizations in Pasadena is not surpassed anywhere in L.A. county. And some people feel like it's as many as six hundred that are based here, filed with the state but they're located in Pasadena, which also demonstrates a very rich, healthy activism here locally. They're on a wide variety of topics, everything from art to healthcare to youth programs and after-school activities to seniors. There's a multitude of nonprofits and community-based organizations that deal with those issues.

And we have a Community Foundation, which many cities have. One interesting part of our Community Foundation is that there are a huge number of donor-advised funds. So let's say that you'll go, you strike it rich off being a historian, and you feel like, "I don't need all this money, and I want to share it with the rest of the community." Instead of starting your own foundation, which, of course, Gates did and Irvine did and Annenberg and all those people, you could just say, "Hey, Community Foundation, I have a couple million bucks. I want it to be donated to the development of future historians, and I want to start an internship program through UCLA's History Library so that we can have funding for the next twenty or thirty years. Will you manage that?" And the Community Foundation will say yes, so that we have dozens of community members who've done pretty darn well in their lives, and they've just said, "I want to give some back." So there are numerous, I think, indicators of a healthy, vibrant community. There are people here who are committed. We have our own theater, the Pasadena Playhouse. We have our own symphony, the Pasadena Symphony, which is combined with the Pasadena POPS. We have the Rose Bowl. The Rose Bowl is another example, I think, of visionary community support, because that was built over eighty years ago, and just last night I was over there because they had a game between the Galaxy and Manchester United soccer teams. So it was an international friendly game. But probably the best example of that is the Tournament of Roses and the Rose Parade.

So for 125 years, community members—in some ways, you know, it's a—what would you say? It's a fun—it's not kind of the heavy "We're going to solve unemployment," or, "We're going to solve lack of healthcare," or, "We're going to solve child abuse." It's more of a celebration. But I think that's important to maintain in life as well, especially if you look at cultures and traditions in Europe. They all have their festivals, and so this is kind of the New World's or the United States' mechanism for having a festival on New Year's Day where in Minnesota they're digging out under four feet of snow, and here we're deciding whether to go to the beach or go to a parade. But the Tournament of Roses is a 900-member volunteer organization, and for any town of 140,000 to have—and they aren't all Pasadena residents, of course, because they come from the surrounding communities too. But 900 people who are dedicated solely to making sure a parade happens, that's in some ways a little bit odd, but in other ways it's pretty impressive that they understand that it brings so much joy and happiness to so many people that they would dedicate the whole year to planning for that particular parade. So there's a lot to be said about this community. That notwithstanding, there are many areas where it can still do better and live up to its name. And I'll just sort of close or wrap with this thought, is that I've always felt like Pasadena is a microcosm of the state and then of the country. And the reason for that is because you see everything here. You see extreme wealth and you see extreme poverty. We have over six hundred people who are homeless every night on the streets, and we have mansions that are going for five or 10 million dollars or more, and we have 20,000 people who are housing challenged in this city, which means by housing those aren't even the homeless, but those are people who are either crashing on beds or couches, or they're two or three families who are living in one apartment or that's designed for like two people. Or they're on the edge or on the verge of going month to month to month to barely making their rent, and instead of being 25 or 30 percent of their income, it's like 70 or 80 percent of their income goes to rent. There are 20,000 people in that category. But then on the other side, you have indicators like every day there are 100,000 jobs in this city. It's that productive that it generates 100,000 jobs. Those aren't jobs just for Pasadena people, and so there are a lot of people coming into the city. But that's a really strong economy, and it's very diverse too.

But then on the other hand, in the school district over 50 percent of the students attending the school district are on free and reduced lunch. So free and reduced lunch is an extreme indicator of poverty, because the levels are so low to qualify for that—or I guess in some ways you would say high—but that demonstrates that there are many, many families. The population of the school district is about 17 or 18,000, so you have fully nine to 10,000 kids every day who are just barely getting by, and if they didn't have either a free breakfast or a free lunch, then a lot of them wouldn't even eat maybe one meal a day.

So while, again, like the United States, there's so much that we've accomplished during the experiment of this democracy, there's so much more we could do to be assisting people who are disenfranchised, people who are struggling, people who are, through everything, from education to race to socioeconomic status, who are just being cut out of the system. I feel like if we can make great inroads here and create a more just and equal society here, then I think that it's possible to be an example for the rest of the state and then the country so that we do practice what we preach as far as everything from the Constitution to Jeffersonian concepts of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. So it's a good place to work, but there is a lot of work to be done.

AOKI:

On that note, the Neighborhood Connections Office, your work there, I want to move into that. But do you want to take a break or get water?

BIERY:

Yeah. [End of July 24, 2014 interview]

SESSION TWO July 25, 2014

00:00:25

AOKI:

Okay. So this is Kyoko Aoki. I'm back here at the Flintridge Center with Brian Biery. Today is July 25th, 2014, and this is the second session of our interview for UCLA's Center for Oral History Research. So today I'd like for you to begin by talking about your time with the Neighborhood Outreach.

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BIERY:

So I came back from graduate school and, as I said before, I knew that I didn't want to work in corporate America, and so I was looking for employment in the nonprofit sector or government. So I went to a variety of agencies and multiple applications, and I went to a place called American Friends Service Committee, looking for possible work there, and they actually had a binder with jobs postings. So one of them was for a job with the city of Pasadena in what's known as the Neighborhood Connections Office. Neighborhood Connections is a unique model for neighborhood organizing and Neighborhood Association support. Pasadena, along with some of its other unique qualities, has had Neighborhood Associations for over fifty years, and, in fact, one of the oldest ones is Linda Vista, Annandale, and that's probably closer to seventy, eighty years old. Neighborhood Associations are mechanisms or systems by which neighbors have a voice in their neighborhood, and it's a wide range of issues, just about anything you could think of related to quality of life, so as mundane as traffic or street trees, to more serious issues like gang activity or drugs, drug sales. So the Neighborhood Connections Office was created in the early nineties to support and sustain and develop Neighborhood Associations in the city.

It turns out now that this current day there's probably close to eighty Neighborhood Associations all over Pasadena. The reason for the high number is because they vary in size. So some can be just a couple blocks, but others are as large as 1,000 households. The largest one, West Pasadena Residents Association, is kind of the bottom southwest corner of the city, so it encompasses—I think it's probably close to 3,000, 4,000 households, so it's a pretty good size. Not every city has Neighborhood Associations, and not every city has neighborhood support or city staff support for neighborhoods. There are a few others in the L.A. area. Long Beach has a very good Neighborhoods office, and City of Riverside has a great one, too, and then other cities do it on varying levels. We helped to start a group called Southern California Neighborhood Partners where all the cities meet usually once or twice a year and talk about common interests and issues, and then learning, sharing best practices and learning from one another, both on the neighborhood organizing side, but then the quality-of-life side. There are lots of innovative programs in other cities that can be either copied and pasted or just borrowed from, or aspects of it can be borrowed. So the other organizing system is a national Neighborhoods USA conference. It's a conference, but it's an organization that their main function is to provide the conference, and at the conference there are workshops on neighborhood organizing, neighborhood advocacy, neighborhood programs, relationships between neighbors, relationships between neighbors and local government, relationships between neighbors and businesses, between neighbors and schools. So it's actually a very informative educational process. And we hosted that conference again back in the nineties, and then I ended up attending ten of them in various parts of the country and have been able to see some good models for neighborhood organizing, but then also some really dynamic and great neighborhoods to live around the country.

One of the basic building blocks of that strength or that power is relationships between neighbors. So what's really helpful is for neighbors to trust one another, neighbors to be able to do things together as basic as maybe having a block party once a year. But we always said that our original building block is just saying, "Hi." So our society overall, you're sort of socialized to say, "I mind my own business, you mind your own business, and we get along just fine," so we build fences between neighbors and we create all sorts of mechanisms by which there's not a social space. There's not a social context. So while I was working there, I talked about the story of in many neighborhoods people kind of speed in and out, and they don't really spend time with their neighbors. But it's as simple as—or it's as common as people have an automatic garage-door opener and they have attached garage, so they get up in the morning, they're late for work, they have a cup of coffee between their legs, and they have talk radio on, and they are trying to throw down a doughnut or a bagel, and they race down the driveway and they almost hit the neighbor's cat. And then they close the garage door, and then they speed out of the neighborhood, and they don't connect with anyone.

Then when they come home, it's the same thing, try to get home as quickly as possible because something's going on there, and the door closes behind you and then everything is inwardly focused. So you turn on the TV or your turn on the computer, and for a lot of people these days, if they do receive a newspaper, the newspaper person just puts it on the porch so you don't have to go out on the driveway and get it. And a lot of porches have either been dismantled or they're not in use, so people don't go out and sit on the front porch or stoop. And then you have your automatic sprinkler system, and then you have a gardener who comes and mows your lawn and takes care of your yard, and so there are less and less opportunities. It's even to the point in some places where people have other people walk their dogs, so they don't even interact that way. So one of the biggest challenges with neighborhood organizing is enabling people to get to know one another, and by what processes or what strategies do you allow them to build trust and form relationships. So one of the big challenges in that process is that quite often people organize around a negative or an issue or a challenge. A very common one—maybe not the most common, but a very common one is speeding through neighborhoods, which the neighbors are the ones who do it, but they always say, "It's my neighbor who's doing that." So, invariably, traffic-calming measures are investigated, and oftentimes speed humps are placed in neighborhoods, but if you just organize around that issue, once you get the speed humps in, there isn't necessarily any reason to keep talking. Speed humps are in, we're fine, we've calmed traffic, and then everybody goes back to their old routines. After all the meetings that they had with city staff and with other neighbors and with maybe consultants on what the right height of the speed humps should be and how wide it should be, and how far they should be placed from each other, and what's going to happen when there's an emergency and the fire truck has to come in, and they're going to get down slowed down by the speed humps.

So, invariably, quite often people don't stick together after that. It's the same with a drug house or a gang house, is that once it's cleaned up or once that issue is resolved, then there's not a mechanism in place to hold people together. Sometimes, serendipitously, they do stay together because they've learned more about each other through that process, but it's not a guarantee or it's not an outcome that is extremely common. So you have to be more intentional about forming processes or activities that bring people together. My mother's neighborhood is middle-class or upper-middle-class, and so it's pretty stable and it's pretty quiet and tranquil, and not really many issues at all. So what they've done is they have an annual block party, and they've been doing it. It's relatively recently. It's probably the last ten years. So they never had block parties when I lived there, but we did other things. And I think children bring people together, too, but we always had games that we played out on the street, which kids don't do as much anymore, so all the moms saw us either playing touch football in the street or kickball or Capture the Flag, or we would be on someone's lawn playing—what was it—Red Light, Green Light or something like that or all sorts of neighborhood games. We even were the point where we had plays. We would produce neighborhood plays and then do them in someone's backyard or garage, and everyone would converge on that driveway.

So there was a fair amount of intimacy between the families. So my mom has been able to sort of recapture that. There's not the same use of space as there was then. We had this game called Kick the Can, and so sort of like Hide and Go Seek, but the way to get free is there's a can on the corner. There's someone who's "it," and they're wandering around the neighborhood looking for the other kids, and you just have to tag them. But the way to escape is if you could get back to the can first and actually kick it, and then you were free. Then the person who was "it" would still have to keep looking for all the other kids. If they found one, then that person would become "it," and then the game would shift. But if everybody became free by kicking the can, then the kid would have to be "it" again. Anyway, those brought all of us out, especially in the summertime with daylight savings time, so we were out, ten, twelve kids were out on the street playing. These days in my mother's neighborhood, kids play with one another, but it's more internally focused. I was surprised. I was over there a couple of weeks ago, and the neighbor has three girls, and I think they range from like nine to fifteen, and they had a lemonade stand in front of the house. And I was a little bit surprised, because I don't see those very often anymore, but many of the neighbors came by and bought the lemonade. But with this neighborhood block party, it's sort of a catalyst for people to get to know one another, and then they spend all afternoon together. It's usually in September or early October, and that's enough to keep them in—so then they know each other so when in those harried busy days of the work year, they still can wave and say, "Hi," and smile and know who that person is and then feel comfortable about where they live.

And just to sort of wrap around that, because I think you have other questions, is imagine a neighborhood where you don't know anybody, and could be urban, like downtown San Francisco or New York, or it could be suburban tract homes in San Fernando Valley or Orange County where it just goes on endlessly with home after home that look pretty much the same but then there's no interaction. If you didn't know anyone in your neighborhood and you had no relationships, how would you feel? There are a few people when I ask that question when I was working for Neighborhood Connections—just a few, not very many—would say, "I'd be fine," and they were adamant about it. But most people, certainly I would say 90 percent of the folks I surveyed, would say, "I feel a little uncomfortable. I feel a little maybe even worried or scared, or I wouldn't feel safe, necessarily. I wouldn't necessarily like where I live." So then I say, "Well, imagine a neighborhood where you live, you know pretty much everyone and you have really good relationships with a few people, and actually some of the neighbors are your friends. How would you feel about that?" And except for the curmudgeon who wants to be isolated anyway, the vast majority of the people say, "I would like that very much and I would like to have that in my neighborhood now, and, as opposed to the other option, I would prefer to know people." So I think it's absolutely human nature that we yearn for connection, relationship, and attachment to people around us.

One of the other examples, I would say, is imagine you're in a wagon train and you're going from St. Louis to Sacramento. It's 1849. But your neighborhood is that wagon train, and you're going from, like, 2014 to 2020 together, and in that wagon train you've got all these neighbors and you've got people who have lots of talents and skills, and then there might be some external threats. If it were a wagon train, you'd have to meet a lot of the people. Maybe at one end or the other, you wouldn't meet everybody, but you'd have to form relationships and work together to make sure that everyone made it safely from St. Louis to Sacramento. So it's a similar conceptual framework for traveling through time from 2014 to 2020 as an intact neighborhood or group. So the Neighborhood Connections Office was a really, really good place. I was there for almost ten years, and it was a great place to help others to work on that neighborhood fabric, and then also the other main part, of course, was the advocacy. So I've seen neighborhoods do amazing things as far as improvements, and a lot of it being driven by the people that live there. Plenty of examples, everything from parks that were, in the nineties, centers for drug and gang activity, to today you go by them and they're filled with families and children and people playing and butterflies and hummingbirds. So the power of people coming together is another aspect of that whole concept of working together as a cohesive unit and making vibrant change. So there's some really terrific examples. But what we also saw is that there's some neighborhoods that are more difficult to organize than others, and some of it's predicated on socioeconomic status, although there are several Neighborhood Associations that are in working-class neighborhoods that are pretty vibrant. But people with a little bit more income generally have a little bit more disposable time or energy to dedicate to the neighborhood.

But that experience showed me that there are places that are unorganized and remain so for a variety of reasons, and then generally in places where there's less organization or less communication between neighbors, those are the places quite often where negative behaviors can germinate and then grow. So part of the conundrum is, is that how you organize people who are disenfranchised from each other or cut off from one another, and so trying to identify one or two people in a neighborhood who are willing to commit a little bit of their time and energy and then using those as sort of change agents and organizers for the rest of the neighborhood and then bringing people together around, again, a positive framework. But all that takes time and energy and then encouragement, and the Neighborhood Connections Office did that and still does that to a certain extent, although the staff has been reduced dramatically since I was there. It's really, really important for local governments to invest in that type of community organizing, and in the enforcement vernacular, it's thinking about public safety, so it's a crime-fighting tool, and one of the basic building blocks for that has always been Neighborhood Watch groups. There is a significant distinction between Neighborhood Watch, Neighborhood Associations, and then Homeowners Associations, so they're all different. Or even Tenant Associations. So Tenant Associations are generally renters. Homeowners Associations indicate that within those boundaries, they are all people who own property. So when you think about condo complexes or townhome complexes, that that's an HOA. So if you're renting in that complex, nine times out of ten, you don't have a voice or a vote. It's your owner.

Neighborhood Watch, two differences between that and Neighborhood Associations that are really significant. One is topic, so Neighborhood Watch is specifically around public safety, and a Neighborhood Association can be the litany of all those other topics that I discussed, everything under the realm of quality of life. The Neighborhood Watch is pretty much about crime and crime prevention and crime fighting. Sometimes they throw in emergency preparedness, which is kind of nice, but it's not always the case. The second real important difference is size. So Neighborhood Watch is defined pretty much by what you can see, so it would be hard to have a Neighborhood Watch with a thousand households, because you're talking about—like one of the neighborhoods I'm thinking of is called Bungalow Heaven, and it is Orange Grove on the south, Washington on the north, Hill on the east, and Lake on the west. So between, for example, Hill and Lake, there are—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven—I think it's about eight blocks. So like the people over on Hill, they can't be watching what's going on on Lake, so it doesn't make any sense for that to be a Neighborhood Watch. You have maybe a dozen Neighborhood Watches within a Neighborhood Association like Bungalow Heaven. So those are all important distinctions to know, and then when you get back to the places that are unorganized, how do you assist them to think about a structure that works for them that meets their needs? But if it's a place where there's higher crime and then there's more fear between neighbors, it's hard to convince them, especially in the higher-density areas and, I would say, challenged neighborhoods, socioeconomically, it's more difficult to build trust between neighbors, but it's not impossible, and it's not that it can't happen, it just takes a little bit more effort and neighborhood organizer, community organizer, usually either through a nonprofit or a church or city government, who can go out and walk with them and make sure that that happens.

So, being with Neighborhood Connections for quite a while, I saw the neighborhoods that were more disenfranchised, and so when the opportunity came to apply for a job here at the Flintridge Center that was more specific, it wasn't trying to work with all the neighborhoods in the city, but it was more specific about just a few neighborhoods and then with just a certain segment of the population. I thought it was a really interesting challenge. So I was doing my day-to-day work with Neighborhood Connections and the job posting came up, and I looked at it and I thought, "Oh, that's really interesting. I'll apply." Then I went back to my work, and the next thing I know, the date had passed, so I didn't submit an application. So then a couple months later, the posting came up again. I thought, "Oh, are they adding another person?" Then I realized, no, it's the same position. So I said, "Okay, I'm going to apply." Again, the date passed, and I didn't apply, and so the position closed. So I thought, "Oh, okay, I'll just keep doing what I'm doing. I'm fine." So it came up a third time, about a month later, and I thought, "Okay, let's get organized. Let's set aside a couple of evenings and put together that application package." So the third time, I finally did manage to do it.

So I went through—it was a fairly rigorous application process, because I had a group interview with twelve community members, which I've never had to do quite like that before, and then I had a second interview with a smaller cohort, and then finally I had a third interview with the executive director, or conversation. So it took a little while. And then what was good was I was able to create a transition point, so I started working part-time for the Flintridge Center and I still kept my job at Neighborhood Connections for about three months and then finally transitioned over here full-time. What that enabled me to do was to help Neighborhood Connections to identify some leadership and then help to get this project started. So the first project I was hired to work on was a federal grant. It was called Communities Empowering Youth, and the idea was to reduce gang violence or gang activity—it was gang activity, youth violence, and childhood neglect, which pretty easy tasks, so I figured I have those wiped out in about a year or two. The interesting program design, though, the mechanism by doing that, was to support and help grow nonprofit organizations, so it was actually kind of a visionary grant. Certainly people have opinions about the Bush administration, pros and cons, but this actually came out of the Bush's Office for Faith-Based Initiatives, and it was operated out of the Department of Human Services. They have an administration or a section in there, Children, Youth, and Families, I think is what it's called. There were 133 cities that received the grant, and most of us received reallocation, so it wasn't just one two-year grant, but it ended up being, for us, it was two two-year grants, and they were pretty significant. I think they were around 200,000 per cycle, and it was actually pretty cool, because what we used it for was capacity-building for nonprofits.

So we had twenty-two nonprofits that we were working with here in Pasadena that were all youth-serving. So it was divided up into four areas: program development, leadership development, organizational development, and then what they termed communication outreach. So under each of those categories, there were measurements or measurables and goals. So, like leadership development would be something like board recruitment, board training, executive director training, and then it's essentially called leadership replacement. So, do you have a leadership plan? Because your ED may retire eventually and so who's going to take over? So in each of those categories there was some really definable objectives. So we provided workshops, training, seminars, consultants, so one-on-one technical assistance between EDs and our consulting team, and a variety of other supportive educational, informational, skill-building types of activities. We did that for almost four years, and I think that pretty much all of them grew and benefited and developed. The idea or the undercurrent was that if we make the nonprofits stronger, we help more kids, or maybe not numerically more, but they'll be more effective of what they're doing with children and youth. It was actually a really good thought process, and I don't think it continued under the Obama administration, but it was creative leadership and it benefited quite a few neighbors.

We also had the opportunity to go to Washington, D.C. each year—so I went twice; one of our other staff members went the third time—and interface with all of these other cities. Because everyone had to go—if you were a recipient, you had to send someone and learn what they're doing. How else would I have known what was going on in Spokane or Omaha or Baton Rouge? It was a fascinating conversation to hear the types of—because what you then learn, too, is that issues are not dissimilar, that we're all dealing with similar challenges, and everything from family concerns and family structures, which are often predicated upon everything from employment to relationships to more dramatic issues like abuse, and then you're dealing with the impacts of poverty, which then are also the impacts of educational systems. So it was a great way to share and learn from other cities as well. So I was hired here to do that, and it's just sort of evolved and grown. The Flintridge Center has moved away from that capacity-building, which it did for probably over ten years. Way before I was here, Flintridge was already doing that, but not in such a focused way. One of the challenges is that while capacity-building has great value, no one really wants to fund it, even government. That's why this Communities Empowering Youth grant was so, I think, innovative, because, generally speaking, no one really wants to fund the strengthening of nonprofits. So if you go to private foundations, there's not a whole lot of support, and I think some of the reasons why is they feel like they'll get more for their investments if they invest directly in programs, and they just assume that the nonprofit is going to figure it out. Everything from payroll to HR issues to how do you manage volunteers to—it's just like, nonprofits, a lot of people don't realize, but they're just like businesses. You have to have an infrastructure that's really efficient, otherwise—you know, budgeting. Otherwise, you're not going to be effective.

That being said, nobody really wants to fund that. So we've shifted our capacity-building to the city and one of the libraries, so there's a library that hosts all of our texts and books and manuals on improving nonprofits, and they also have staff who have been trained to help people there. Then if there are any workshops, we host them here, but they are invariably developed by the Center for Nonprofit Management, which is solely focused on that goal. They're housed down at the California Endowment. The other agency which helps nonprofits is Community Partners, and so we link with them and refer people to those agencies. Or we refer nonprofits to those agencies, but we don't do that anymore because also we felt like it was more important for us to invest our time and energy in direct services and programs for the neighborhood, or the neighborhoods that are most disenfranchised, the neighborhoods that I saw working at Neighborhood Connections that are the least represented, the least organized, and with the greatest challenges: employment, housing, crime, transportation, parks, beautification. Even though Pasadena certainly is not as bad as maybe some of the inner-city areas of Chicago or New York or even Los Angeles, Detroit, or Philadelphia, we do have our share of significant poverty. So this has been a really good opportunity to focus specifically on those needs. So in 2007, right when I was hired here, we experienced a year of high violence. Since this is a discussion about history, maybe to put it in context, is that in the eighties and nineties during the height of the crack cocaine wars and everything from Iran-Contra and all of those other horrible scenarios where inner cities were being inundated with crack cocaine, Pasadena was no different. It is home to especially African American gangs, but there are Latino gangs. But during that time, it was pretty dramatic. We were averaging almost a homicide a week, and this is pretty much 90 percent of all that was related to gang warfare and the drug trade, and so it was between thirty-five and forty-five homicides a year. So for a population at that time, I think it was around 125 or 130,000, that was huge, huge numbers, and that went on for years and years and years, maybe as many as ten years.

So what ended up happening was, throughout the nation, as that part of the drug wars started to diminish and people were not only being incarcerated but influx, it was just a shift away from it, so our homicide numbers went down. But then in the 2000s, we had another wave of gang activity and violence, and it peaked again in 2007, and we had ten gang-related homicides, which we hadn’t had for a few years. The problem with many of those was that several were innocent bystanders. So one of the ones that was the most catalytic, I would say, was there was a sixteen-year-old girl on Lincoln Avenue, which is the street just on the other side of the freeway. In 2006, 2007, there was a local entrepreneur who wanted to help kids to have a place to go, so he started essentially a nightclub for teens. So one night there were quite a few teens just standing outside, I think waiting to get in, and so a drive-by occurred and just fired random shots. So a sixteen-year-old girl, who had no connection apparently to that negative activity, was killed and died on the street there. So there were several other incidents like that of young people being gunned down and just happened to be in a crowd.

So the City Council called for the development of an ad hoc Committee on Youth Development and Violence Prevention. So as a result of that committee—it met for six months and had elected leaders from all parts of government—there were a couple of outcomes. They commissioned a report to be made, and it was called the Harder Report. So it has both a statement of what the needs are, but then what the resources are, so what are the gaps. It’s called a gap analysis, so where the gaps in services and what needs to be done better for youth. So it made some recommendations, and one of them was to have a more unified effort to better link nonprofits and government and even businesses and have everything working together for violence prevention, gang prevention. Then it said in order to achieve that, you need some hub or you need some sort of a center point for that to take place. So they called it Institutional Home for Violence Prevention and Youth Development, and so that home ended up becoming Flintridge, because the community saw the work that we were doing already and suggested that we apply for it. There was only one other applicant, because I think in part, though, no one else wanted to do it, but also because they saw that we had experience and expertise to be able to take on that responsibility. I think that happened for the first time in about 2009, so since that time, we’ve been the Institutional Home. And what that means on a variety of levels is we convene these important nonprofit agencies and community partners on a monthly basis, and we bring to them issues of importance and have discussions around how we can help youth to reach their full potential and how they can be guided away from negative behaviors and activities, and then other relative issues.

So an example is just last month’s meeting, we had the police chief come and talk about police use of force and is it appropriate, when it’s not, how it’s investigated, what their measurements are, and then also how citizens can have a role in improving policy around police behavior, and then if their rights are violated, what avenues they have for complaint. So that’s an example of one of our meetings, but every month we have a different related topic. What has also happened, it’s called the Vision 20/20 Initiative, and the other part of it is there are several strands for action. So you could call them programs or projects, but within the overall initiative there are efforts being made to address specific needs through a particular structure. So an example is, as with all over the State of California, budget cuts, especially four or five years ago, have diminished education budgets, and one of the first areas for education budgets to go was the summer school process. So summer schools in our district are not as broad and developed and not as many summer school opportunities. In fact, what ended up happening here in our district is that they created an actually very terrific summer school, but you have to pay to go to it so that eliminates a lot of the students. So for the kids who are kind of on the margins, with several other partners, including Lake Avenue Church and Day One, which is another nonprofit, we helped to create a summer school. This was its fourth year, and it’s called Skills, and it identifies specifically kids who are falling behind in their academic credits, and it brings them the opportunity for an intense summer session—I think it’s six weeks—to earn between five and ten elective credits so then they can get back on track for graduation. It also does some life skills-building, and it’s pretty holistic in its design.

So that’s one strategy. It’s one of the programs underneath the 20/20 Initiative. And what was observed was the need. Kids are behind in school, no summer school, no way to make it up, so what do we do? And then pulling together a multitude of resources so that then it can be offered and at relatively low cost. But also there’s a relationship there with the school district so that the kids actually do get credit and that the classes are taught by certified teachers. So that’s one example. I won’t talk about all of them, but another one that’s really important that I’m doing a lot of work on right now, which is all of this, is there’s a model in Los Angeles that I think is really illustrative about how you can deal with gang activity, and that’s Homeboy Industries. Their motto is “Nothing Stops a Bullet Like a Job.” So, taking a page from their training manual, we believe as well that employment is a crucial factor. It’s not the only one, but it’s a crucial factor in helping people move away from gangs and violence and then becoming a member of society. So about five years ago, we conducted a survey of felony-friendly careers, so there are a multitude of them, even though it’s tough out there, if you have a record, to get a job. It’s really, really hard. So, one, we wanted to find one that had great opportunity, and, two, we wanted to find one that we could help guide people into, and, three, we wanted one that was a career and not just a job.

So because some of the places, like a warehouse or forklift driver, they might hire someone with a record, but that doesn’t necessarily allow you to grow and develop yourself and earn a living wage. So I won’t go into all of the ones we looked at, but we narrowed it down to construction. We felt that that was for us, at least in our community, going to be the best mechanism by which we would give people a second chance. And to help them to get into construction apprenticeships with unions, the apprenticeships then are extremely well structured and you have different periods. Depending on the union, but you’re starting maybe at twelve, thirteen dollars an hour, which is pretty darn good compared to minimum wage, and then each period you’re moving up fourteen, fifteen, sixteen dollars. So by the time you’ve finished your apprenticeship in three or four years—actually, the other brilliant part of it is it’s actually like going to college. For all of us who went to college, it was four years of education and dedication and learning. Apprenticeship is exactly the same way. The slight difference is, it’s not all in the classroom and you’re also invariably working at the same time. So you’re earning while you’re learning. When I went to college, I had a side job, but it wasn’t tied to my academics. So we went to the unions and said, “If we would like to send you some of our community members to work for your unions, what should we do to prepare them? And they said, “Educate them. Educate, educate, educate, and help them and also prepare them to know it’s hard work and they’re not going to be expected—.” I was talking to one of them one time, and he said, “I don’t want people to give 115 percent, I don’t want 120 percent. I want 100 percent. Because if you’re giving me 130 percent, you’re unsafe. With so many moving parts on the jobsite, we want people to be as safe as possible, and I don’t want someone running around trying to show off and then drop twenty pieces of lumber on someone else’s head. So they need to know that they need to work hard, but it’s eight for eight. So it’s working eight hours. It’s making sure that you get there on time.” And, actually, in the construction field, if you’re on time, you’re late. So if you’re supposed to be there at seven, you need to be there at 6:30 or 6:45 at the latest. So they said, “Prepare them.”

So then we went to Pasadena City College and we said, “You, as an educational institution, have the expertise in preparing young people for a wide variety of careers. Would this interest you to help us to prepare people for the construction field?” And they said, “Well, it’s interesting you ask, because back in the nineties we actually did this.” We went to them—this is probably 2008, 2009, and so we said, “Could you revamp, recreate what you did back in 1998?” And they said, “Yes.” So with PCC, we developed a curriculum that includes construction safety, math, blueprints, rigging, hand tools, power tools, some hands-on, the safety I was telling you about. They end up earning an OSHA 10 card, which is very valuable, because even though it’s a basic level, it shows that they know what it’s like to be safe on the job. We also give the a hard hat, we give them a vest, safety glasses, and then we help them to identify—all these cards on my desk right now are all unions. This is the plumbers, and this is the tile, marble, terrazzo. There’s a carpenters here.

So we’ve evolved to the point, after five years of doing this, where it’s really, really working, and these guys want our graduates. So we’ve been able to place dozens of our graduates in various unions. The laborers is the most common, but carpenters is next. And to actually accomplish what we sent out to do, which was creating a career pathway for youth and young adults who had had challenges in their lives—and the stories are amazing because we went to City Council last week, we had three of them talk about their experience, and it’s incredible, because they talk about the fact that, before, one, they weren’t employed or barely employed, and now they have a great job and they’re making good wage. But, invariably, they all said, “Now I have benefits, and now my two kids, who didn’t have,” whether it was health insurance or some of the other support systems, “they have that now, and I just feel such a relief that I’m able to provide that for them.” This happened a couple years ago, but one of the first graduates, he made it into the laborers’ union, and so he had been working for a few months, and he came into my office, and he looked at me straight-faced, and he said, “I got a check.” And I said, “Well, you’re supposed to get a check. You’ve been working for a few months. You finally got one?” He said, “No, no, no, no. I got a different check. I got a check. And I said, “Well, what do you mean?” He said, “Look at this.” So I looked at the check, and it didn’t look any different really, and he said, “Look down at the bottom.” And it said, “Vacation.” And I said, “Wow. So you got a vacation check.”

And he said, “Yeah.” He said “They even pay me to go on vacation. I can’t believe this, because I never even got paid vacation before, let alone a little bit of money to use when I go on vacation.” And it’s not even that it’s thousands of dollars, but it’s a couple hundred bucks that he could go take his family when they go on vacation and use that for food and a place to stay. So there’s some really powerful stories of transformation. One last aspect of that is that, again, there are a lot of moving pieces, and the educational part is fairly straightforward, but even there, we’re constantly having to improve that or restructure it based on PCC’s requirements and then the state’s needs for certification. But the part that’s really complex is the job identification, the bridge to an apprenticeship, and so our strategy since the beginning of the year and a little bit the end of last year is to identify local hiring opportunities. So local hiring is where preference is given to people who live in the zip codes where the project takes place. Los Angeles Unified School District has done a great job of local hiring, and then the city on a couple of projects too. The key defining feature is that these are projects that are utilizing public monies, so taxpayer dollars, so they can set a limit or they can set an expectation on the contractors to say—and you can set it at any level, but, “Twenty-five percent of your workforce has to be from our zip codes.” And it’s a great tool because it enables us a pathway. In fact, I don’t even want to think about what would happen if we didn’t have that. It would be so hard to get guys on these jobs. But because they have to comply with local hiring, this week, the last couple of weeks have been real fruitful because several contractors have said, “Help us.” So we placed—the 31st we’re going to have a guy who becomes an electrical worker. He just finished their training, their boot camp. And then we had three guys finish the laborers’ boot camp, and one of them started work on Wednesday, and we’re hoping the other two will start in the next week or two. But they were all accepted into those boot camps because of this local-hiring process.

So what’s exciting right now is that the city is doing a project on—we have a power plant here, and so their project is the [unclear] Power Plant, and that’s $140 million, and it’s going to be going for a couple of years. It was funny, one of the guys who’s on that job, who’s ours, he was texting me on Wednesday with photos, and he was saying, “They’re taking down the smokestacks,” and he had like all these photos of they were putting it on the back of a truck. He was excited to be there, a part of that process. The other one is the school district here has about a $300 million school bond measure, and that’s over several years, but they’re ramping up. There’s a project right now that’s building a brand-new school in Sierra Madre, and so we have three guys working on that project. And then there’s a gymnasium and science center and cafeteria that they’re building at a middle school not too far from here, and we have two guys on that project. But the ones that I talked to this week, they’re preparing for several other schools that are going to be worked on this fall. So there’s Blair High School and Field Elementary School and a little bit at Eliot Middle School, and they need people to go into their apprenticeships. So that was one of the reasons why I needed to talk to Daniel and Chris yesterday, because we need to identify some of our graduates who are interested in going into those trades. So the plumbers and the terrazzo marble and the plasterers all need people right away, so we’ll send them two or three each, and I get more people employed.

The bottom line is, a lot of these guys have had, as I said, issues and challenges, and many have been incarcerated, and so to hear them say—well, like, one of them that spoke last week at City Council, he said, “If you had seen me ten years ago, you wouldn’t recognize me now, because I’m nothing like I was.” And when I introduce a lot of our graduates but also our staff to people, they don’t know. They can’t tell that this person was in jail or prison, because the transformation’s so great. They just automatically assume he’s just a member of the society. So what we’ve done also is we’ve helped people to transform their lives to place where they are accepted and they’re normalized, and, as one of the more conservative members of the community said, they’re taxpaying, contributing members of society. It comes from a perspective that, one, that people are redeemable; two, that people deserve second chances; three, that we all make mistakes; and, four, that if society is structured in a way that doesn’t allow for that rehabilitation to incur, then people invariably go back to their old habits. So not only from a humanitarian standpoint, because it’s a moral and ethical right thing to do, we believe that firmly, but also for kind of the more conservative part of the community, it’s better crime-fighting. It’s being smart on crime instead of tough on crime. It’s actually eradicating the causes of why people make poor decisions, why people—if you do any sort of interviewing of people in prison, you’ll find out that they didn’t just wake up one morning and say, “I’m going to raise Cain and I’m going to destroy my neighborhood.” It’s they’re pushed into those activities. If you talk to a guy like Father [unclear], no one, it’s not their career goal, especially at a younger age, to be thinking about, “Oh, I want to join a gang and hurt people.” It’s because of other factors, and once we understand that as a society, then I think we can make more intelligent public policy and then respond to when people make poor decisions and act out negatively, we can respond with a more intelligent, comprehensive solution, as opposed to just warehousing people in jails and prisons.

AOKI:

Speaking of warehousing, you said that you go into the jails maybe once a month. Can you talk a little bit about that aspect?

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BIERY:

Yeah. We’ve been doing incarcerated reintegration services for over just about three years now with the advent of, I would say, the earthshaking AB 109 and realignment process here in the State of California. So we were kind of minding our own business and assisting people every month through our research fair and our peer support network and some of our other services, and an L.A. County Sheriff caught wind of what we were doing. One of the deputies contacted me, and he, at that time, was in charge of the merit program. The merit program is a significant component of education-based incarceration, which Sheriff Lee Baca developed or helped to develop during his tenure at L.A. County Jails. The interesting part was that they have a very well-developed program inside the jails for the small percentage of inmates who they serve. It’s an excellent program, it’s very, very good, and for those people it’s created the opportunity for extraordinary change and growth and development. My personal wish is that they would expand it, and if not the entire population in L.A. County Jail, the vast majority of them should be going through this education-based incarceration process.

But what this deputy saw—and I think he’s very wise to recognize this—is that once they leave the jail system, then there’s nothing to continue that, not only the educational process, but also the transformational process. And then I’ve done a little bit more thinking about this and some research, and so you make a significant investment while they’re inside, and an appropriate one and a correct one, but then once they’re released, unless there’s some sort of continuous support or assistance or kind of a soft landing or a place to go, much of what was learned inside will be either forgotten or pushed aside. And especially if people’s needs aren’t being met, they’re going to default back to survival. The recidivism rate in the State of California for prison is pretty bad, but the jail is also very bad there. Depending on the surveys that you assess, they’re anywhere from 65 to 75 percent. So when you’re having two out of three or three out of four people go back—and especially if you compare to other states around the country and other jurisdictions, our recidivism rates are as high as anybody’s. You start to think, well, what are we doing wrong in that passageway? Now, the merit recidivism rate, just to be clear, is much, much lower than the overall jail rate, so anybody that goes through education-based incarceration already has an advantage, and it’s going to be dramatically lower than the general population. However, that also could be reduced even more if there was a kind of a seamless warm handoff between jail and community-based organizations or the community itself on the outside.

So the thought was to create a system of what’s known as a merit continuum. So merit continuum, and we’ve been operating it for about a year and a half, it’s not exactly a twelve-step meeting, but it’s a peer support meeting where every month we come together with people who—and it’s evolved to be a lot of the people who are coming out of jail and they can sit in a circle, talk with case managers who are there, and then other people who are getting out, analyze what their enormous challenges are, and then figure out ways to assist them. It’s been a great idea, but I don’t feel like it’s supported enough by the L.A. County Sheriff, so it’s just because there are a few people who are willing to do that for no pay and no support. It should be broadened and strengthened and funding should be provided for it, and all over the county. It’s in four locations, kind of four and a half locations right now. But with a county of 12 million people, you really need maybe a dozen different sites, especially because there are places of concentration where people are going back. So as a result of the merit program and of this deputy seeing that we have services that are valuable, I’ve been going in for the last year and a half every month, and sometimes more than once a month, into L.A. County Jails, Twin Towers, Men’s Central Jail, and then I’ve also been out to Pitchess Detention Center a couple of times. But I go in and I specifically talk to the merit group, and usually I have a little discussion about, “What are your challenges and what are your resources?” to try to get them to think about, “When I get out, how am I going to align my resources with my challenges?”

And then I go into the services that not only we provide but then all of our partners, and I usually leave them with flyers on resource fairs around the county, because there are about half a dozen that are going on regularly, and then also on our apprenticeship preparation program, and then our resource fair specifically. But it's always a really fascinating conversation about, "What are you going to do when you get out of here?" And some of them are going to be released in a couple of weeks or a month or so, so they really need to be planning. And the fact that for some of them there isn't a place for them to go, and so housing and employment are the one and two major concerns. The irony with the employment, though, is that not everyone is ready to work, and that's not only just mentally ready to get up and go to work every day, but it's also there are little odds and ends that they need, like an ID or a driver's license. Doing these referrals for the unions, actually they are very minimal requirements. It's not like you're applying to be a professor at UCLA and you've got to have an armload of degrees. It's a high school diploma or GED, it's a birth certificate, and it's a California ID. And a lot of people coming out of jail and prison don't have those. So even if mentally you're all ready, you're prepared, you're ready for an eight-hour workday, oftentimes it takes you a little while to get those together. And especially if you don't have a GED, that sometimes takes a couple months to be able to practice, study, and then take the test.

So there's a lot of case management support, systems navigation that happens behind the scenes for all these individuals that are coming out of jail and prison. One of the stats that I thought was interesting, and I don't know if it stays constant, but a couple of months ago they were saying that—and it makes sense—the L.A. County Jail system houses around 20,000. It's more or less at capacity, so it's maybe, what, 19,000 people. And half or many of those are waiting for trial, so there's a lot of turnover, and there's people being released all the time. So I was told that about three to four hundred people are being released from Twin Towers every day, and at that kind of volume, you know that many of those people don't have the wherewithal to be able to—so if that's the case, you're talking about, what, two thousand people a week. That's a lot of folks coming out on the street and needing some sort of support. So the experience I've had the last year and a half in the L.A. County Jail system has been fascinating, and it's been very revealing and educating and inspiring, too, and I met some great, great people through that process. But you also recognize immediately that these are folks that have been disenfranchised in some way, shape, or form, obviously, and most of them understand that they did something wrong. I've always been pretty impressed that there's sort of, I think, this stereotypical viewpoint that a lot of people are like, "Oh, I didn't do it. It wasn't me. It was someone else," but a lot of the guys are willing to take the responsibility or acknowledge that that's what they did. What they don't like is then what is considered to be the unjust punishment for that. So, "Yes, I broke the law or I transgressed, but is—." Like we had a guy that spoke at our Resource Fair this month, last week, and he had a triple life sentence for a nonviolent crime as a juvenile. He spent almost twenty years in state prison, and so he's in his forties now. So he was released early. It was like three or four months ago—maybe it's five months ago now. He's amazing. He's just a brilliant guy. He's one of those who spent all of his time reading while he was inside. He's extraordinary. And he's a good case, because he says, "Yeah, I broke the law. I did something. But I was like sixteen, and nobody got hurt. And the next thing I know I'm being sent to prison."

So we have to, as a society, do a better job of analyzing how we're adjudicating, how we're sentencing, and then how we're treating people who are relegated to jail and prison, because the way it's set up now, it's—and I always wonder about the people who are into the whole punishment side, the punitive side, and when you think about a child. So this goes to the merit continuum and when they get out. I always ask people who are parents, "So let's say your child has broke the rules or transgressed and so you ground them, right? So grounding is they can't go out for their friends for two weeks. So when those two weeks are over, then what happens?" And invariably, they say, "Well, you start a fresh slate. We begin again." I said, "So you're not, like, hanging that over their head all the time and saying, 'Well, you know, you did that two weeks ago, and so I'm not going to let you do this or that, or you can't watch TV tonight or you can't go out with your friends on the weekend'?" "But, Mom, I thought the grounding was over. That time period's over, right?" "Well, I'm still mad at you." Or, "I'm still going to punish you."

So it's the same thing with incarceration, is, one, we continue to punish people after they're released, and we do that by not allowing them to qualify for everything, certain types of assistance, in some parts of the country voting access, housing requirements, and then the worst one is employment. If we really were about rehabilitation as opposed to incarceration, suppression, and this whole concept of punishment, if we were about second chances, then you would see recidivism rates drop, and you would see crime drop, and you would see healthier families these days. One of the books that I lean on a lot is The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness by Michelle Alexander. There's some stats in there that are really important, and one is that there are approximately, and it probably has varied a little bit, but there's approximately two million kids with parents who are incarcerated. So if you help that parent when they get out, that's going to go a long way to making sure that a child is assisted, nurtured, strengthened, that they're able to effectively access the resources they have available to them, like education. Another stat that's pretty staggering is—and this one varies a little bit too, but it's between six and seven million people in the country are under some form of supervision, so it's probation, parole, or in jail. They're under some form of custody, so that's jail, prison, federal penitentiary, and that's a huge number of people. The other stat, which I need to do more research on, is how many people in the country have a record. With those kinds of numbers, it's probably twenty, thirty million people have record in the country, and if that's the case, that's a lot of people, the way the system is set up right now, who are not going to be able to move back into society and be actually, like, again, the conservative side way, taxpaying contributing members, because of all the barriers they have. So being in jail has really opened up my eyes to not only the challenges people face, but the reasons why they've ended up where they've ended up. [recording interrupted]

AOKI:

Okay. Sorry. That was an interruption, but we're back. I just wanted to ask you about you had mentioned Pasadena being a microcosm of various things that happen that is a reality in the United States, and I wanted to hear your perspective on how you think what the work that you're doing here might be a model in other places in California, first of all, and then possibly for the country as well.

BIERY:

So, basically, I see that Pasadena is a microcosm of the state, because we have—and then by extension the country, too, because it's a land of rich and poor, and then the wealth gap has grown dramatically in the United States overall, especially in the last twenty years, ten to twenty years. So it's the same here in Pasadena. So, as opposed to the concept of people rising up through the income levels, it's relatively static, except for if you're at the very top, and that group has grown maybe not numerically but certainly in overall wealth, so the top 1 percent are controlling more and more. So we talked a little bit about my experience in Guatemala and Latin America, and that was—it's always funny because, again, some of the conservative elements of society are always saying, well, we're way different from other countries and we're way different from especially these backwater Latin American dictatorships. But one of the prime features of those countries' history or experience is accumulation of wealth at the top. So when I lived in Guatemala, there was always this—everyone, everyone in the country said—I can't remember if it was seven or nine, but the nine families that controlled everything. So the family that controlled all of the supermarkets and the family that controlled all the trucking, and the family that controlled all of the construction, and they were the ones with all the power. Everyone else was just battling for the crumbs, and even government salaries were all pretty low, but everyone wanted to get a government job because at least you got a relatively steady paycheck and enough to survive on, but you really couldn't do anything with your life in a broad sense, not only politically but also economically, because of the power and control of these nine families.

I'd always hear this comment again from conservative parts of our society that would say, "But we pull ourselves up by our bootstraps here. I mean, there's plenty of opportunity here, and we don't have that oligarchy that they have. It's not that extreme." But when you look at statistics today and the amount of wealth—and certainly I think that folks at UCLA have done and universities have done this research, so I don't know what the exact number is, but when 1 percent of the population has something like 40 percent of overall wealth of a society, that's unhealthy. And what I never understood is that they didn't recognize that too. So whether you're a Ford supporter or detractor, one thing that Ford said that's actually kind of beneficial is, "I want my workers to be able to afford my cars." I think as a society, especially again the people in power, so to speak, have forgotten that, that if the folks at the bottom—and it actually came from a place I didn't expect. But National Geographic is doing a series on food, and so this particular month there's a really fascinating article on food in the U.S. and how many people live food-challenged. It's millions of people. So one of the reporters they had was invited over for dinner, and dinner consisted of white toast and whipped cream and like some sort of Spam meat. And so when you wonder about people contracting diabetes or other illnesses and then also about study habits of kids and that their diets are so, so narrowly defined and filled with a wide variety of everything from sugar and salt to chemicals, then it's not surprising that people end up making poor decisions and not having growth and development.

Actually, one of the ways to measure or analyze that is what is a typical meal for someone in a wealthy neighborhood, and they're going to Whole Foods and they're getting organically grown fruits and vegetables. and their families are members of gyms and going to yoga classes, and so they're all about health, which is great and smart. But then other parts of society don't have that access. Pasadena is the same way, where you have this stark contrast between what I would term lower-socioeconomic or lower-income families and extraordinary wealth. Just real briefly, there was the Millionaires Row that had families like the Wrigley Chewing Gum family, the Gambles of Proctor and Gamble, and then, of course, the Huntingtons, who ran the railroads in this country for decades. Those were the billionaires of the day, and they lived here in Pasadena. And yet they had their needs for workers—at that time they were called servants—so, groundskeepers, gardeners, chauffeurs, maids, so we had all of those here in town, because it wasn't like you could commute from the 909 or out in San Bernardino to get to work. You had to live in the community where you were working in 1913.

So that historical framework has continued to this day, where there are still extremely wealthy, extraordinarily wealthy people, and they live just a few blocks from people that are barely getting by, putting two families into an apartment, living on Food Stamps, qualifying for free and reduced lunch, having to utilize the public healthcare, free healthcare system, because they can't afford it otherwise. So if we're able to develop systems around everything from the violence prevention, youth development, and then also formerly incarcerated, reintegration, reentry, as well as career pathways in a place like this, I truly believe that they can be replicated and utilized as models for other cities all over the countries, and, in fact, some other cities might even have an easier time of it because they might be more homogeneous, economically speaking. We have such a concentration. There's a professor at Occidental College named Peter Dreier, Professor Peter Dreier, and he conducted a study a few years ago which demonstrated the vast wealth inequality in Pasadena, and it's the highest in the State of California, and that means that the highest wage earners are so far above the lowest wage earners that there's this enormous gap in wealth and resources. So I don't believe that that's an enviable title to hold. I feel like that doesn't represent the democratic notions that our country was founded on, but also what was expanded philosophically in the sixties in the Civil Rights Movement, that these democratic—and then in the twenties, too, around the Suffrage Movement—that these notions of what is fair and just should be applicable to all and not just those who can afford it. So I'm hoping that with our successes, that other people will copy and paste and borrow everything that we're doing and use them in other cities and communities around the country.

AOKI:

On two occasions you mentioned some national gatherings that you've been part of that was a great learning experience. Is there anything like that that you're participating in today or thinking about?

BIERY:

Yeah, we did this year and last year. This year and last year we went to the Neighborhoods USA Conference from Flintridge, not Neighborhood Connections, and we provided workshops. This year was on our Intervention Institute, which I didn't talk about at all, but that's how we're helping former gang members to actually become outreach workers and positive role models. Then last year we did a workshop on community organizing overall and how to bring people together around common interests and concerns and help them to be more effective in their process. We may try to do another workshop next year. It's in May, so we haven't defined that yet. In September, I'm going with the deputy chief of police and the head of pastoral care for Lake Avenue Church to a national conference on faith, and it's CDCC. It's something like Community Coalitions on Faith, and it's in Raleigh, North Carolina, and there will be about two thousand people there. So we're going to be talking specifically about our Reintegration Council and the work we do, the multiple strategies that we have to help people coming out of jail and prison. So that'll be on a national level as well. So those are two areas that we will definitely be involved in and sharing what we've learned.

AOKI:

Anything else you want to add?

BIERY:

I don't think so.

AOKI:

All right. This is really wonderful. Thank you very much. [End of July 25, 2014 interview]