



The Activist Files Episode 47: Shelter, Safety, and Strength - Housing Justice and the Struggle for Black Liberation

Narrator:

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Meena Jagannath:

Welcome to a special black history month episode of the activist files. My name is Meena Jagannath. I am the Director of Global Programs at Movement Law Lab, and I'm also a very proud member at the Center for Constitutional Rights. This Black History month, the Center for Constitutional Rights is honoring the power of black rage and committing to protect the love-fueled fury that helps us fashion the world we deserve. The liberatory future we're building is one where all people's fundamental needs are met and essential to this vision is safe and universal housing. The failure to secure decent housing as a human right is a source of mass oppression suffering, particularly for black and poor communities. And it has animated, powerful social movements across the world. Joining me today to talk about this crucial issue and it's a great honor to have him here with us is long time CCR, comrade, and friend, Rob Robinson.

Meena Jagannath:

He's a formerly homeless community organizer and activist whose work focuses on changing people's fundamental relationship to land and housing. He's Senior Advisor to Partners for Dignity and Rights. And he works with social movements all around the world, including the movement of people affected by dams in Brazil, the Shackdwellers Movement, Abahlali in South Africa, and the platform of people affected by mortgages in Spain, at the PAH.

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Meena Jagannath:

Rob, Uh, so glad to be here with you today. I've admired your work, you know, over the years. And it's, it's just such a pleasure to, to be able to talk with you on the subject today. Welcome.

Rob Robinson:

Thank you Meena, thanks for having me. And it's an honor to join you again. We've worked in the past and it's always good to reconnect with old friends.

Meena Jagannath:

Absolutely. Well, you know, since this is a Center for Constitutional Rights podcast, I'd love to start perhaps with your story on how you came into a relationship with CCR.

Rob Robinson:

It's, it's an interesting story. So, um, as you mentioned in my biography at the beginning, I am a special advisor to an organization called Partners for Dignity and Rights formally the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, or NESRI as many folks know it as, and the former executive director here at NESRI was a longtime board member of the Center for Constitutional Rights. So in 2010, myself and many other African American organizers and activists from around the country met in Atlanta to carry on work that had started in Miami called Take Back the Land. Take Back The Land was in answer to the foreclosure crisis that saw people of color, particularly African Americans being foreclosed and evicted in record numbers. And we decided that we need to have a response. And that response was to look at the work that was taking place in Miami, started by Max Rameau and others called Take Back the Land.

Rob Robinson:

And we met in Atlanta on Labor Day weekend of 2010 and formed what we call Take Back The Land National. And with that, one of the things I've learned over the years from organizing, especially the type of organizing and activism that I do, I believe in reclaiming property, right? Taking it back, hence the name Take Back The Land. So we said, if our houses are being taken by banks and banks are putting them back on the market, after the Obama administration took our tax money and bailed out, said, banks, we need to have a response. And we said, you can't have the tax money and the houses also. So we decided to take back the houses. Well, if you're gonna work in that manner, you need legal relationships. You need legal support. Many of the members of Take Back the Land, particularly Max Rameau, wasn't fond of talking to the legal community, but I said, "Max, it's a must."

Rob Robinson:

So lo and behold, Kathy sets up a meeting for us with the Center for Constitutional Rights. And we go to their headquarters on Broadway in New York City. And we get brought into this long conference room with the long table, you know, kind of conference rooms you see on television. And, you know, we were somewhat intimidated, but I'm like, we gotta do this Max. And Max was like, okay, you wanted this. You're gonna do all the talking. So we sit there for a minute and in comes four lawyers from the Center for Constitutional Rights. And they sit down, they introduce themselves and we introduce ourselves and they look at us and say, how can we help you? And I didn't know what to say at that points. I just, I blustered out. Listen, if we tell somebody in Des Moines, Iowa, to take over, take back a house that the people were evicted from and foreclosed on, what kind of charges are they gonna face? And they looked

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at us and smiled and said, we could help you with that. And that was the start of an incredible relationship. And the Center for Constitutional Rights became a legal supporter and a critical partner of their work of Take Back the Land in 2010.

Meena Jagannath:

That's such a beautiful story. And, you know, I just being from, uh, having worked in Miami for a long time with the housing movement, I mean, just the legacy that you all, uh, left there I think is, is quite tremendous. Yeah. It, it's all so great.

Rob Robinson:

It's a source of pride, uh, Meena, for us. And I mentioned off-air that I'm very fond that there is a Take Back the Land archive at the University of Miami. And at the time that that was being put together, I didn't realize the importance of it. But as I sit here today and talk to you and reflect, I realize how powerful that is and what people thought of the work that we were doing. Right? And how people respected that work. And I think that's important.

Meena Jagannath:

Yep. Yep. They still talk about it. The Max Rameau papers.

Rob Robinson:

There you go.

Meena Jagannath:

We we've, we've taken, uh, tenants back to look at those. So it's, it really, really is significant. I think in the moment, sometimes we don't realize it, but we are making history, so, oh, thank you for that story. I'd love to actually rewind a little bit to maybe before, you know, um, uh, the Take Back the Land Movement, you make no secret it's in your bio that you yourself have experienced homelessness in the past. And I'm just curious how, how did that experience and, and likely others fuel your activism and, and how has it informed the way that you organize?

Rob Robinson:

So I would say that that experience transformed me, Meena. That's the way I refer to it now. So I was raised in a working class family in New York. I actually went homeless in Miami. And so we circled back in this, the strong Miami connection, all through my story. I actually experienced homelessness living on the streets of Miami for two and a half years. But it, it was a, a process of transformation going through that, right? As I'm homeless in Miami panhandling in shopping centers and traveling over the causeways at night to go to the beach, to go to sleep, I'm watching these luxury towers go up with this bunting, hanging off, saying "luxury condos coming studios starting at 1 million dollars". And I'm like, well, you know, why are we crossing the bridge to go sleep on the beach? And people are sleeping underneath this bridge. And these condos are sitting empty there meant to add fuel to that fire.

Rob Robinson:

About two years later, all of a sudden, a bunting changes and says condos for lease sign a two year, uh, lease and you get two months rent free, right? I'm like, I'm scratching my head. And I start to hear this term gentrification. And I think that was the start for me of a transformation, because I always believed

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in some of the old stories and some of the old narratives, if you work hard, uh, everything is gonna fall in place for you. But that experience that I went through, I saw it looked like people that looked like me experiencing the same thing. So I started to just think what is happening to people of color, to people with very little in this country? Why is this happening to them? It seemed that everybody went through homelessness, looked like me, and it seemed like a predetermined path. And that sort of fueled my fire into activism. And by the time I got back to New York, I've started to hear the same stories about gentrification, and I just educated myself on that term and what it meant. And I think that's what pushed me into activism and thinking about housing and land in different ways.

Meena Jagannath:

And I mean, just to, to maybe dig into that a little bit more, I mean, did you, did you kind of go on sort of a historical exploration? Like how, what, what, what did that, that journey look like once you got back to New York?

Rob Robinson:

I think it's a couple of ways, right? So, um, obviously I'm African American, you know, uh, audience can't see me, but you know, it's Black History month and obviously I'm African American. And I think about my family's experience, right? I grew up working class family on Long Island. Uh, my family moved from the five boroughs. We moved from Brooklyn to Long Island in the sixties. Other family members thought we were rich, but as a kid, I didn't see my dad a lot because he was working 18 hours a day in the restaurant business. And as I, I start to educate myself on housing and housing struggles, particularly within the African American community. I started learning things like predatory lending and the effect in redlining, and then knowing a personal story that happened within my family when my dad and my mom went out to look at that house in Freeport, where was raised, uh, they were told it was sold and not believing that my dad and mom came back and got one of my coworkers of my dad to go out a couple of weeks later, because house was still in the paper and ask about the house.

Rob Robinson:

And the realtor asked if he wanted to make a down payment. And so that's a story that sort of circulated in my family. We know that, right. And then I go through the experience that I went through, but I think that the real blessing for me, believe it or not was me explaining my own lived experience, My family's history at a conference at Columbia University in 2007. I made a statement at that conference that I would argue really transformed me and set me on a different journey in life. And that was "gentrification leads to displacement, which leads to homelessness, which leads to criminalization." And there was a distinguished professor of anthropology and geography in the audience by the name of Neil Smith who stood up and said, can you repeat that? And I repeated the statement. So at the end of that conference, which I sat next to Peter Mokuza some well known names, Brenda Stokley an African American, uh, leader in the Municipal Workers Union in New York, one of the founders of the Million Workers March Movement, Neil came up to the table and said to me, I want you to come and lecture my students.

Rob Robinson:

I want to know how you developed that theory. So he took me to lunch and he invited me to come up and lecture his students. But it was there once I got with Neil, he started giving me historical context of housing movements and asking me to do certain readings. I wasn't an avid reader, but I started taking on the books as Neil requested. And I started to learn. And I, that was part of the reeducation of Rob

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Robinson and understanding the history of struggle around housing and land in the US. And particularly for African American folks, right? Being denied, being subject to things like redlining, watching people went and fought for this country, people of color who were told they could get a GI loan to build a house. But when suburbia was created out on Long Island, they were denied the right to those levid homes.

Rob Robinson:

That was the new suburbia out on Long Island. So that sort of fueled the rage in me folks always ask about the rage, where did it come from? Right. Of reading that history and understanding that history. And I would argue that some of that still goes on today.

Meena Jagannath:

Absolutely.

Rob Robinson:

Because maybe banks don't have a map up on the wall with a red line around it, but you can't tell me that they don't have a computer program as they're interviewing an African American couple, knowing they came from East New York, Brooklyn and saying, oh, flag. Right. The flag is right in front of his face. So I would argue because it's still things like predatory lending going on, discrimination amongst housing still happening. So I would argue that some of that is still going on.

Meena Jagannath:

Absolutely. We wouldn't have so many fair housing centers with testers.

Rob Robinson:

You understand, it's, it is just incredible. Right. And, and the fact that it still goes on is just, it, it just, it digs at you in a way, at least it does to me, which says, okay, I gotta fight. Just fight 'til I go to my grave. And I teach now to New School. And what I tell the students is it may not change in my lifetime, but I certainly gave you the tools. And I left you with a burden of proof that this did happen. Now you have the tools you have to proof that it happened, go out and make the change.

Meena Jagannath:

Absolutely. You know, I'd love to talk to you, just, uh, just kind of piggy-backing off of what you said. It makes me think, you know, just that, that pipeline between housing, eviction and, and incarceration or criminalization, it makes me think of, you know, Matthew Desmond's book "Evicted", and there's this line in there that he says, you know, black men get locked up and black women get locked out where, you know, the prevalence of eviction and among black women is, you know, it, it, it, it, it, it reeks havoc in a similar way as, as incarceration does for, for black men. And I'm just curious from your perspective, whether you have, you know, encountered this, this gendered element. And, um, if you, if you could talk a little bit more about, about that. Um,

Rob Robinson:

So I'm very involved in, in that type of work. I am a member of the Right to Counsel in New York city, which is based on people being evicted and who's being evicted, mostly women, women of color, because they are single family earners or single family household leaders, while partners often are

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incarcerated. We sought out a lot in public housing in New York city. And it leads to a certain group of people being pushed aside or cast aside and almost being branded, um, as, as failures, but it's a system that failed the people. Right? And I think it, it it's exceptionally blatant in public housing. It was meant to be the true social safety net, but let's just say there is a family living in public housing, and the male goes out because they're struggling and maybe goes out and sells marijuana on the street and he gets picked up or gets a, a, uh, gets arrested by New York City, or even gets a, a, a desk appearance ticket.

Rob Robinson:

You are now branded with a violation that might exclude you from said public housing, right. That was the breadwinner in the family. The woman has three kids that she's left with, and sometimes falls behind on the rent and ends up evicted. So it's a chain of events that, that are connected. And we know it disproportionately affects the African American people. I think as all of these problems do, uh, one of the reasons why Take Back the Land work prospered. It was an African American response to what was happening in the African American community, right? And then I think it was egregious, If you ask me that African American president took our tax money and bailed out those banks, and basically those banks foreclosed and evicted us in record numbers. Take our houses back and put it back on the market they profited it twice while we're left out on the street, egregious doesn't work. It doesn't work for us. So we had to find an answer. And I think the same thing happens with incarceration and happens the structural racism that has been backbone of this country, right from the time it was created. And we were brought here from Africa against our will. It is so ingrained in our society that we're constantly having to chip away at it and chip away at it and chip away at it, but we can't quit. Right. So all of these things I think are connected and interrelated.

Meena Jagannath:

Absolutely. I'd love to, uh, again, zoom out perhaps a little bit to talk a little about kind of the frames in which you do your work today. Uh, I know that our paths have crossed, um, in the work with the US Human Rights Network. And, um, and I know that through your human rights, advocacy, you use this frame quite a bit. Um, and as someone who's worked in, uh, a number of social movements in the US, I know that unfortunately, it's not that common that the human rights frame really is used to describe, you know, housing issues and other issues that, that we see. And so I'm just curious, um, you know, what, what is it that made you gravitate towards human rights frame? Um, why has it been compelling to you?

Rob Robinson:

So it, it, there's a couple of reasons. And, you know, I always like to reflect on the work by sharing stories. And one of these stories I'd love to share is as a member of Picture the Homeless, when I came out of homelessness, I joined a New York base group called Picture the Homeless, which looked to empower homeless people to be a voice of themselves. And in 2009, we saw people being evicted foreclosed on and vacant property all over Harlem in New York City. And we made a decision after visiting to Take Back the Land movement in Miami to start, taking back spaces in New York City. And the first time we did it was March of 2009. We moved on a building on 116th street Madison Avenue in East Harlem. And it was the first time anybody had done anything like that since maybe the Young Lords in the early seventies.

Rob Robinson:

And it, it drew a big crowd to the area. We had about 500, uh, allies there. And I stood on the corner

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that there was a police negotiator for that action. And I was negotiating back and forth, but it empowered me. And it, it said to me that we need to change this relationship. And I'm standing on the corner. And there was a Human Right to Housing Director from NESRI to time, Tiffany Gardner who came up and stepped in between me and a New York city police, chief named Eduardo Caban, who I was negotiating with. And she interrupted us and she hands me a business card and said, you know, you guys would be a force to be reckoned with, if you wrap this work around a human rights frame, come see me, let's have lunch after you're done with all of this. And she walked away and the police chief looked at her like, who is this?

Rob Robinson:

You know? So I, I came down and I, uh, I met with Tiffany and I met with Kathy and they started explaining to me what human rights were about. And I was intoxicated by that. I said, we have a right, the fact that I'm a human being, I deserved this, right? And then they gave me a little handbook of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which I read from cover to cover. And it was something I kept in my back pocket from that point on, if it wasn't in my back pocket, it was in my backpack. And the next time we took over a piece of property was July 2009. And when the cops approached me that day, I stood on the street in front of New York City police, all little white shirts. And I read article number 25 to them. And they just froze.

Rob Robinson:

They didn't know what to do. And I said, these words are powerful. Look at these guys just stopped. But I, you know, I think that was the beginning of it. But I think what really pulled me into the mix was traveling with the US Human Rights Network. And I was able to participate in the US's initial appearance before the Universal Periodic Review and many people I think you and I both know people like Asian DK, Eric Tars, uh, Cindy Soohoo I, I could go on. And Joanne Kumofward who was at Columbia at the time, Reesa Kaufman all stood around me and said, you know, we're in the high commissioner's office in Geneva. And they said, there is the delegate from Mexico and Iran, go tell them about homelessness in the US. We're over here, if you need us. And it was empowering to me, right?

Rob Robinson:

They said, you have knowledge that we don't have, you have this lived experience. You understand this issue, explain to them what is happening in the US. And then to see if you fast forward that initial appearance, the US being questioned about this issue of homelessness, that I had a, a part in educating on delegates from around the wellness. I said, this is powerful, but I also saw movements around the world using this to their advantage in having conversations with government that didn't happen here. And I said, this is something we have to embrace. We have to learn how to use these tools.

Meena Jagannath:

Absolutely. And I guess along those lines, I mean, you know, we, we both have, have been in those spaces together on different occasions. Have you had you had the opportunity while in Geneva, perhaps in, in other forums to link up with other struggles, they may be about land and housing. There may be about something else, but I'm, uh, I'm just curious to what extent, uh, your, uh, advocacy there also, uh, led to new bonds of solidarity.

Rob Robinson:

So I think there was several Meena, and as I do this work now pushing forward from today, or from

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when I started talking about this, there are, I call them my four fundamental, basic rights, the right to housing, the right to food, the right to water and the right to healthcare. I think those are the four fundamental rights that our government needs to ensure. And I've connected the dots with all of these struggles. And mainly from learning from advocates that in other places, you know, you mentioned my bio groups, like the PAH in Spain, Abahlali in South Africa. You know, I didn't maybe didn't mention a, the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil because that's where I formed my opinions about land and our fundamental relationship to land. So I think it was, you know, those, those times in Geneva meeting other movements, meeting other movements from Southeast Asia was empowering and forming those relationships and understanding how they advocate and advocate in many ways, different from us.

Rob Robinson:

And those differences I'll start with philanthropy. I don't want to throw anybody under the bus, but I think organizing here has been professionalized when in some of those other places, we do it because there's a need, we want to change the living conditions not to get paid. And I think that's a big, fundamental difference when you do work to get a, an income. And I don't wanna deny anybody an income don't get me wrong. Don't, don't, you know, don't, uh, misinterpret the message, right? Everybody needs to, to earn a living. But when you, when you are earning your living based on somebody else dictating the work, I think it's problematic. So I'll just, I'll, I'll leave it at that. But I, as I work around the world, I see them approach this work in a different manner. And I've learned so much from social movements around the world.

Meena Jagannath:

Yeah. I mean, I think we could, we could, we could, uh, go on a whole long tangent if we wanted on that subject. But, but, uh, but just to like in keeping with the, with, I guess the power of, uh, of linking these struggles, I mean, what potential do you see? Why, why is it that you put energy and time into cultivating, uh, these relationships across borders

Rob Robinson:

Is a, a very fundamental and basic reason how life can be much easier with just access to land. Right? The Landless Workers Movement in Brazil was a movement that formed as people were traveling to and from the center of the city to work every day and pacing and, and passing large swaths of open land. And all of a sudden, they started to look at their constitution, which said, land has to serve a social purpose or function, right? It has to be growing food or housing people. These folks, many of them are in camps or they're, they're homeless, and they don't have access to land. So they started that vacant land that they were passing. They started to settle down on that land. They bring in families at night, the men would start to, to work, to land and plant food. When daylight comes, they find bamboo and build a structure, an abode to live from right now, all of a sudden you are able to stake claim to that land because it's serving a social function, right?

Rob Robinson:

More people come. So when I go to work, Meena watches my children. When Meena goes to work, I watch her children, childcare issues go. More people come who understand how to take those natural plants and heal the sick, our healthcare problems go away. Land is central to our struggle for life for life, liberty, right? Land is so essential, but we live in a country where land is commodified. And it's problematic. If you don't have the money and you can't pay, you can't have access to land. That is problematic in my eyes. And this is why I preach. And I'll go to my grave preaching. We have to change

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that fundamental relationship to land. It has to change. This is not gonna work. It'll work for the 1%. 99% of us will be assed out.

Meena Jagannath:

I'd love to dig into that a little bit more. When you, when you say that, what, what do, what do you mean? What is the vision that you are sort of at?

Rob Robinson:

Why can't we set aside land in perpetuity, to change the way our relationship looks to the land. Right now you buy a house you may end up not even owning the land underneath that house. Right. But if we set aside land and give it to a community to govern on their own, to common on their own, all of a sudden, the ingenuity of people say, okay, well take part of the land and we'll start a little farm. We'll grow food that meets our needs, healthy food, right? The land is in perpetuity. If we construct a building on top of it, let's just say we have enough land to create 23 and a half room apartments. We call that mutual housing or cooperative housing, right? So if I build a unit and it costs \$75,000 to complete that unit, if Meena bought one Meena, can't sell it for more than \$75,000, because that's what you paid for it.

Rob Robinson:

It's not up for profit. It's removed from the market. It changes the way we think about land and how land reflects in our of lives. You could also use land to common. There are so many different things that land does, but having access to land fundamentally can change the way a person lives in this world. But it's not the way it works. And in a city where I'm, where I'm talking to you from right now, air rights are for sale because they're running out of land. So you can go straight up. But the, the air has been commodified to a degree that you and I can't afford it. Nobody can afford to live in Manhattan because the air rights are for sale.

Meena Jagannath:

Yeah. I mean, I just, two, I have two questions kind of piggybacking off of that. I think one, I, I don't know if, um, if you've been kind of paying attention to the conversation in places like Miami, where sea level rise is threatening, you know, where folks can live. And there's a, there's this talk of climate gentrification. I mean, it's so clear that there climate conditions demand that, uh, we change our relationship to the land and yet there, and, you know, I think even here and elsewhere in the, in the country, I think there's a big issue of, of political will. I, I, I'd love to just hear from you just like a, a temperature check. Like are, how are you feeling on the potential or the, the possible,

Rob Robinson:

I think, yeah, mean, I think we're getting there. I think it's a little bit slower than it needs to happen, but I'm very much involved in it because one of things, as relationship with the UN and doing human rights work. The Friday before Super Storm Sandy hit New York. We had a presentation at the City University of New York Graduate Center that featured Raquel Rolnik the UN Housing Rapporteur. And we couldn't even get her back to her country. We had to have an activist drive from Chicago, into New York, drive her to Chicago, her and her daughter who was eight and a half months pregnant so that she could fly back to Brazil. But we saw the effects of that storm and what it did to people, primarily people of color, people living along the waterfront, people living in public housing were affected by that in ways.

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Rob Robinson:

So I think there were lessons learned whether or not the political will works in a quick enough way to resolve. I do think it's on its way. I would like to see it work a little bit quicker than it's working, but we are rethinking that particularly in New York, it is, there are efforts around, and I think those are two movements that are coming together. So movements like the environmental justice movement and the housing movements are partnering, right. I work a lot with the environmental justice movement of New York coalition in New York and, you know, along with housing movements, but I think we, we need to really consolidate our movements and our movements need to come together. And that goes back to an issue that I mentioned earlier, philanthropic dollars sometimes keeps us working in silos and that's problematic. So sometimes we have to look at where we are getting our resources from, to do the work and maybe detach ourselves from it and say, what does our community need? Not necessarily what does that philanthropic organization think we need? Right. Um, it's a, it's a big change, right? And I, I do think there are some movements moving in that direction, but I do think we are still struggling a little bit with that issue, but the movements are bound now and are, are coming together around on this issue of climate justice housing and how it affects our lives in general. And I do think we're moving in the right direction. I'd love to see it move a little bit quicker.

Meena Jagannath:

Absolutely. And I mean, I think, you know, you said it earlier too, just with all of the other rights, the right to food, the right to water, all those things are interlinked. And I think, I think as you were saying, it's rather than one by one,

Rob Robinson:

They surfaced during COVID right. We saw problems that we knew existed already, but they were exacerbated by COVID and who was the most affected black and brown communities or low income, uh, communities of color, always the ones who suffered the injustice. But I do think, you know, as a result of several issues, you know, it's never good timing to see people killed by police. But I think that George Floyd killing was an awakening in this country and people said enough is enough. I, you know, we've had it up to here and something's gotta change. And seeing the young folks go into the street night after night was impressive to me. Uh, I used to occupy those streets. Can't do it the way I do now, uh, the way they do it now. But I think what's even more impressive to me was a visual that I got from the arena in Brooklyn, where there was a lot of protests on a nightly basis. And a bunch of young blacks were lined up facing the police as if there was gonna be some sort of face off. And their young white allies came in between them. And the police and said, if you're gonna start swinging and shooting, you're gonna have to do it through us first. And I said, something is changing in this country. Finally, it was an impressive sight for me. And, you know, I hopefully, it, it, it sparked change, um, in this country that we'll see going forward.

Meena Jagannath:

Yeah. And hopefully we, younger folks can carry on the mantle that, that y'all have, uh, have been carrying for so long. I mean, of course you, you mentioned it before structural racism at, at the root of all of this and, and, you know, there's, there's so many ills from the past that have yet to be healed, um, between redlining, Jim Crow before that slavery across the world. Colonialism. I mean, I think now that that conversation is, is opening. We possibly have the, the opportunity to accept,

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Rob Robinson:

You know, we got the UN to finally listen to us. We wanted a hearing on structural racism, but they definitely had the conversation. And, you know, there was 600, over 600 signatures from different organizations all around the world that sort of pushed the UN in a corner and said, you need to focus on the US. There's a problem over there. And, you know, we got the necessary response, maybe not to the degree we want, but the world is now looking closely at this issue, which I think is important. So

Meena Jagannath:

I watched that urgent debate. Actually, I thought that, you know, there, it was one of the first and few times that I had seen the UN at the, that level actually reckon with the legacy of colonialism and slavery. So that was something work. Well, you know, I would be remiss since you are sitting in New York. And, um, since, uh, we are talking about housing to not mention the, um, the recent tragedy in the Bronx, the fire in the building that killed 17 people, most of whom were black immigrants. I, I, I just wanted to, to hear your reaction to that news, you know, what, what do you think was happening happening systemically there?

Rob Robinson:

I think what we've seen, we've seen these big structures, um, have many violations, the city lists those violations, but do nothing about enforcing that they be corrected. So ongoing issues that we saw. But I think at this point losing 17 lives sort of was a slap in the face to a lot of people. And it was a wake up call, right? So, you know, much like the building collapse in Miami, you have to little bit closer at some of these structures that are going up. Are people engaged in the laws that support these things in the right way? Are you doing inspections in the right way? And then who is government and elected officials in bed with? There's a problem going to that building as one of the owners of that building served on the current mayor's transition team, which is problematic. And it just, I, you know, since I came into this work, I've seen the relationship between elected officials and development be problematic in New York.

Rob Robinson:

And at that same forum that we had Raquel Rolnik just before superstorm Sandy, Tish James, the current attorney general was the city council member and her opening statement was, and it's something I will never forget. Housing is to New York, as oil is to Texas, which means, you know, it's a commodity, it's very important. So as long as it's a commodity, it's gonna be problematic and the wealthy are always gonna have their hands in trying to get more. And who's at the bottom of all of that poor, low income people, black and brown people, people who just migrated here looking for a better way of life. So offering from the injustices of those relationships and it has to change. And I think that's our challenge going forward to really push elected officials to sever those relationships and do what they were elected to do.

Meena Jagannath:

Absolutely. Um, maybe we can end on this question, a meditation on, uh, black rage, the theme for this month. Does that term resonate with you and, and how,

Rob Robinson:

You know, I think a lot about it. I think, yeah. You know, when I first heard it, I, you sometimes don't

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want to be identified with a theme, but at the end of the day, it takes rage to make change. Right. Um, I got involved in the Take Back the Land work, cuz I was angry. That's rage, right. I was pissed off seeing what was happening to people. And then my own lived experience that I talked about and the way you label what I went through, no I'm pissed off. Right. Because if you paint the issue with a narrative or with a broad brush, you'll say you're homeless, cuz you don't have an education. You don't have, you don't wanna work. You have mental illness, you have a chemical addiction. I had none of that. It happened to me because of something in life and it's a social issue.

Rob Robinson:

So stop blaming putting the blame on people. So yeah, that rage has come outta me. And then seeing as I started to understand the history of housing and African American people and seeing what happened over a period of time. Yeah. The rage came out of me, which is why I, you know, when I had the opportunity to take back a house, right. I had no problem. I just wish I could find more allies in New York so that we could take a multi-story building and really set an example because that is something that resonates with me. If you could take back one of these structures in New York City, maybe then the world wakes up, I've seen it in Sao Paulo. I've seen the banners drop out of 20 story buildings in downtown Sao Paulo in Brazil. So anything is possible. And I, I think we definitely need to see another world, the world we live in, as it exists right now just doesn't work for me. So yeah, that rage is coming out. That rage is being expressed in different ways. Maybe not to the degree that other people expect it to. But yeah, I got some rage, you know, I'm tired of it, man.

Meena Jagannath:

I hear that. I hear that. And let, let, let's see what happens after this podcast. Well, thank you so much, Rob. I mean I could, I, I could honestly talk to you all day long. We could swap stories. I, I feel like there's a deep well to explore there, but um, but it was, it was nice to, to have this initial conversation, hopefully, um, one of many, and I just want to also, uh, tell our listeners that, um, for any resources, additional resources, they would be posted to the Center for Constitutional Rights website, which is CCRjustice.org. And uh, Yes, our family

Rob Robinson:

Meena, thank you so much for having me. This has been incredible and it's always great to reconnect with friends and allies and look forward to working together in the future. Um, I'll be doing this work 'til they put me in a hole or they burn me whatever they do with me at the end, but I ain't quitting. You've gotta see some change, right? Thanks for having me.

Meena Jagannath:

Right. Thank you.

Narrator:

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