

Introduction to Our Community Recording

[Laughing]

Tawana: I had brussel sprouts...

Janice: Oh, then you should be sitting where Leon is sitting.

Leon: Alright. Hi. Hello and welcome to this very special recording. I'm sitting with some very special guests and we're sitting down today to do a little intro to our community. My name is Leon Hister. I am the Admin Manager with Detroit Community Technology Project. I'm sitting with all of our directors. They're looking very nervous.

[Laughing]

Katie: Don't tell people that.

Leon: But, let's just go ahead and jump in to some introductions. Why don't you start with your name, your pronouns, what sign you are (your sun sign), and what you do at DCTP.

Katie: Okay, I'll start. My name is Katie Hearn. I am the director of the Detroit Community Technology Project. I use she/her pronouns but they is fine as well. And you should know that I am a super Sagittarius.

Leon: And then also can I ask an intro question? If you could have a superpower utilizing some part of your body that supports the community, what would it be?

Katie: Such a good question. I think my superpower, and you know maybe I already possess it, but one that I would like to amplify, is the ability to kind of refill people's cups that they pour from because I'm surrounded constantly by people that are working so hard, taking on really challenging and tense work, and I would love to be able to just connect, whether it's an embrace, whether it's eye contact, something to help them refill their cups so they can continue to keep pouring.

Leon: Beautiful.

Tawana: Asé. My name is Tawana. I also go by Honeycomb. I direct the Data Justice Program for Detroit Community Technology Project. My pronouns are she/her and my superpower would be invisibility because I would like to pop into some of these policy meetings and rip up some of this legislation before it makes it out into the community. I would like to put on my invisibility cloak.

Leon: And what's your sun sign, miss Honeycomb?

Tawana: I am a Virgo, which is why I was so analytical about that response.

Leon: Okay, and last but not least.

Janice: My name is Janice. My pronouns are she/her. My sun sign is Leo. At DCTP I'm the director of the Equitable Internet Initiative. My superpower would be to be able to sense where people are coming from. Kind of sense their background because I think that would help with how we collaborate, how we work together, and then helping with us having compassion for each other.

Leon: Wonderful. This is a super trio. Then let's just jump right in. So my first question to y'all is: what is the experience and significance that three black women are directing an org working in tech and data, and specifically doing this work in Detroit.

Tawana: Wow.

Leon: And anyone can jump in.

Tawana: Well this is Tawana, also known as Honeycomb, jumping in. I think it is tremendous because Detroit, being a predominantly black women-led household city, and technology being historically a space where our innovations are not recognized, to have three powerfully strong, intelligent, black women leading the Detroit Community Technology Project is revolutionary and it offers up a model that I don't think typically exists in tech spaces. A S.T.E.A.M. model. A model that thinks that art and agriculture and environment are just as important as tech and

math and science. And so I just think we add a little flair and flavor to that world and I just am happy to be part of that work.

Janice: I think for the Equitable Internet Initiative, one of the things that we constantly are trying to do is to change what a technologist is and who they are. We want to get away from this narrative that a technologist has to be a white male, which is why all of our digital stewards who build out the network infrastructures are people of color. And I think that if we're going to say that we practice that, we have to start in leadership. We have to change, you know, the people that are providing the resources, the people that are doing the hiring, leading the training, and making the decisions. I think that's how you start to model the things that you want to see. You start at the top, essentially.

Katie: Yeah, I love that. I appreciate that you asked about both the experience and the significance and I think you all definitely covered that. One thing that I would add is that, you know, oftentimes we are responsible for bringing the conversation back to the racial implications of tech and data and often finding that we are the only ones that, I think, consistently are able to do that or are willing to do that. Going back to that notion of modeling, I think it's very, very significant and impactful for those to see not only what we're doing here and how we're trying to maintain this practice of bringing other marginalized folks in, but also giving them the optics of like, "Oh, yes, that is possible and it is something to strive for and here's why."

Leon: I think that y'all offered up a lot about the work that you do. But, I do want to bring it back to get y'all to really speak about the experience of being black women leading this movement and world making. Are there moments where you feel particularly made aware that you're a black woman doing this work. What is the embodiment of that and this work for you? Y'all spoke a lot about what you are doing for other people but what's this experience like for y'all.

Janice: I think for me it's exciting and at times it can be challenging. The times that I find it exciting are when some of the people that we work with, especially our extended partners, are giving us affirmations on the things that we're doing. And how we are teaching and leading and how, you know, if you're going to say that a technologist is this type of person then why is your leadership looking this way. Those are the exciting moments for me. But, I think the times where it is challenging is when it's time to make a decision. Especially as some of the people, not exactly community partners, but people in the larger community are involved. If I say, "Well, I don't think this is the right time for that," or "I don't think that's a good idea," what makes that challenging is having a person go around me to a colleague, who is not a person of color, seeking an answer to a question that I didn't give. Thus, making me feel like my voice is

invalidated, or that what I said doesn't matter, or that you think that the voice of this other person means more than me as a black woman.

Tawana: Yeah, I definitely mirror that. There are a lot of, you know, I don't like to say microaggressions. There are a lot of aggressions, macroaggressions, that you face being a black woman and organizing specifically in technology. There's a tendency, number one, to prefer white academic males. And then, secondly, white academic women. Then, thirdly, there's the potential for the black voice to be in the fold but it's typically a black academic woman and *then* a person who's on the ground doing the work. And so I've found a lot of difficulty in being a researcher. I've been a researcher for about 20 years. Not only being a resident of Detroit, a long lifelong resident of Detroit, and someone who is trying to bring in the community experience, the historical experience, the technology experience, and the research. But, there are so many layers to getting your voice heard within this work. Especially, if you enter with a black face and you enter with a black woman face. And then I would also argue that if you're a trans black woman, it's even more difficult and those folks exist within the technology space and trying to find a voice as well. I find there's a lot on your shoulders trying to understand that you are carving the way for folks, even as you're being marginalized. You're still carving a way for folks that have even less access than you do. So it's one of those things where you can't just innovate, you always have to be tearing down barriers at the same time. It's challenging and exciting, historic, and revolutionary. But, you do have to have some method of self care within the process so that you can keep going.

Katie: I'm not sure I have too much to add. It is, yeah, equal parts frustration and joy. But, I guess I'll speak a little bit to just daily interactions. It does feel really good to simply walk into an office and see folks that look like me that I know, you know, have varied experiences that will enrich the work in ways that in many other circumstances I would never have experienced. I did work briefly in a more traditional for-profit tech environment and saw those really typical scenarios where I would offer something and it had to be repeated by a white male in the room in order for it to actually be considered. So, having even those moments, you know, stay with you. And so something as simple as just knowing that I'm a part of this team, and as Tawana said, as we're building and innovating we're trying to tear down the things that hold us back, the systems that hold us back. It's a part of the experience to keep all of those challenges. It's kind of a chip on your shoulder to keep you motivated and keep your intention where it should be. And that way, hopefully, the frustrations don't outweigh all of the good parts.

Leon: I want to thank you all for sharing that, first. I think I want to get into the work that DCTP is doing, but I kind of want to keep pulling on this thread. Some of the work y'all do and the worlds you're co-creating together are new and so you are in the arena getting dirty, making

mistakes, creating new paths, and that isn't easy. What keeps you supported and well through that process?

Tawana: Our team... Our team is dynamic. I mean, you know, we're not without our challenges, but I will say that where you might hear in Corporate America, as an example, we have an open door policy and know our whole office is open door. And there is really no "check your mess at the door," right. You come in as your full self and you experience your full self throughout the day. And I think that just the fact that there is a culture of that created within our office and on our team allows for us to work through those things on a day-to-day basis, versus mostly letting all the aggressions pile up, all the challenges pile up, because we understand each other. We understand that if I'm experiencing it, fighting against facial surveillance, then I know that Janice's experiencing something similar within innovating these equitable internet initiatives. And then Katie is experiencing it and trying to be out here and innovate for all these other opportunities for DCTP as a whole. And so when we come in, it's not like I'm experiencing something so far fetched that they can't relate, you know? There's this quote that I always bring myself back to where a friendship begins at the moment when one person says to another, "What? You, too? I thought I was the only one." We have a lot of those moments like, "You too?" you know. So, I think that that's definitely been helpful for me.

Janice: Yeah, I think there's a lot of fun in the office. We have a lot of fun every day. There's always a lot of laughter, a lot of joy, amongst us doing this very serious work. And then I think we have really positive and authentic relationships with each other. And I think that when you have a team that is very important. Not just getting along just to get along. But, I think that we have the ability to really talk to each other, really support each other, and things like, "You know what? Let's take a walk, or let's take a break, or let's go get something to eat." Checking on each other's well being, I think that's really important.

Katie: Yeah, definitely. The shared snacks, the stretch times, the water reminders, visible lunch breaks away from the desk, all the small things that I think the team as a whole is really trying to prioritize because I think we've all, like many folks who will probably listen to this, experienced some level of burnout or come close to it. And this work is really so important to all of us. It feels really good to be sitting here today and know that we've had so many impactful conversations about how we are going to intentionally shape our culture to be more of a space for care and healing to really ensure that we are sustainable in the long run.

Leon: Mm hmm. Yeah word to all that. And I just want to add that I don't know if you realized, but since me coming in I could, it's like palpable, how much wellness is prioritized and kind of how, at least for me, feeling more encouraged to show up each day with my whole self, right.

And that's a practice. When you come out of spaces where you're routinely marginalizing yourself, compartmentalizing, it's a practice of getting back to that wholeness. And I think that our office does create this environment where we can practice that and, kind of, is aware that we're all in practice around that, and that's amazing. I want this little recording to just be me hyping you all up because y'all are doing the damn thing. I think this is another nice segue into my next question. What is the work that people don't see or value that is required to make what you do possible because I don't think that when people see or hear about DCTP, you know, they don't see all this internal stuff. They don't see how many conversations it takes to create an environment where folks are checking on each other and prioritizing wellness and trying to show up with ourselves. That takes a lot of work to make the work that we do possible because like I said, y'all go out, y'all step out into the world and you're seen as black women in tech in Detroit trying to you know fight for racial equity and close this digital divide. And that's just stuff that people do not care about and that takes a toll. That takes a toll on you mentally and it takes a toll on your body. So doing that work to create this internal space is so important and that kind of work is invisible so often. So I want to give you all space to be like what is it that y'all have to do just to make what you do possible that no one usually cares about.

Tawana: Whew, I was looking to the right and my healer. I am constantly having Janice read my tarot and my energy and my spirit and constantly checking in with Katie. And, you know, this thing happened and that thing happened. I think... I don't know if I recommend this or not, but between each other we do not have office hours. That's all I'm gonna say. There is a constant checking in, which I totally value as someone who doesn't even enjoy being on the phone. I find myself messaging and calling these folks. So it's just one of those things where it's like... I'll go back to the fact that it feels good to know that there are people who understand what you're going through. And that's very rare, to be in an office space at that, where you can easily think of three at least three people. You know what I'm saying? Who can understand what you're going through or if you scream in the middle of the day nobody is going to look at you like you're crazy. They're going to go like, "One of those days? Me too." You know?" And so I just think that the constant reiteration of trying to have a space where if you need to work from home today, if you need to check in after hours, if you need to scream in the middle of the day, if you need to take a walk, like Janice was saying. There is a constant reinforcement that that is just as important as doing the work. And it's part of doing the work, you know. You're right. I come out of Corporate America many years ago, thankfully. In that culture there was a culture of "If you have an issue don't bring it into the office." You know. "At 8:01 if you're not on your desk, you're late. Don't spend too much time in the bathroom." There was just so much regiment to regulating your body that just being in this space frees up your body in a way that is just not typical in work environments. So I would say that we nurture creative, innovative ways to do the work and we are more disconnected from the job system than most places are.

Katie: I'm trying to refrain from answering with meetings. There are a lot of meetings. But, beyond that you know there's a lot of time spent in community. We're not just in meetings with

each other, right. We're attending Board of Police Commissioner meetings, learning about what's happening with community benefits ordinances, and things like that because ultimately our work is supposed to really impact residents of Detroit in a meaningful way. And if we allow ourselves to be bogged down by the day to day it's very, very easy to just have that head down mentality. So, I think that we do a pretty good job of remembering what we're in it for and who we're in it for and making sure that we are building out all of these touch points. I don't know if Tawana wants to speak to this anymore, but there's a lot of reading.

Tawana: I just had in my head, "geek out." We geek out, like we literally geek out. And I'm not, you know, I'm on an academic fellowship right now, but I'm your quintessential organic intellectual who has rejected academia. But, as an education piece I'm a nonstop learner and we all are. We're constantly popping in things to read, videos to watch like, it's you know. And we find excitement in that and we literally create a culture of enjoying learning, which is not something that's found in a lot of spaces where you are supposed to be producing work.

Janice: Yeah, I never thought I would enjoy watching congressional hearings ever in my life. I would say the one thing in my work that I don't think that people see is relationship building and managing, for lack of a better word. It sounds like an easy thing to do on paper. Meet this person, get to know them, we'll chill, we'll hang out. But, it really requires you to build trust. It means you have to have empathy and compassion for other people and you have to bring your authentic self into that relationship in order for it to work. You know, it requires a lot of energy as well. One of the things that I try to do in my personal time is to meditate because that helps to keep me calm, helps me to keep my ego in check. I have not mastered that yet.

Leon: The Leo! It's a noble effort.

Janice: Well you know we're meant to be on a stage. We're meant to be in front of people. We are the sunshine. But, yeah, meditation really helps to keep you grounded. When I'm taking certain phone calls, when I'm having a difficult conversation with someone, or if I'm trying to repair relationships that need mending.

Leon: Mm hmm, yeah. If I had to pull a thread through all of what y'all were saying it just seems like so much of it is relationship management whether that's, you know, being in meetings with people all day and managing those energies and how emotionally draining meetings can be. When community organizing and building those relationships it really, I think that's something it's kind of like a buzzword. When we say community organizing and we say it so much, it loses what that actually means. It's so much. Getting them in order, getting them prepped, getting

them ready, and it just takes so much. Especially, I think, to bring it to the Detroit context, too. Detroit has a lot of history and it is in need of a lot of healing. It's been really abused and really harmed and the work that you all describe seems to be in that tradition. How do you build relationships with people who are consistently, systematically traumatized. How do we go in and build those relationships when people can't always meet us where we want them to meet us? Y'all are really kind of figuring out how to do that work and it's really messy. It's really messy. And I wanted to highlight that and not in a discouraging way, but in a way to really ground what y'all are doing. Y'all are coming into these spaces where black and brown folks have been traditionally just marginalized. Especially in tech and access to communication. So, to build these community relationships requires so much relationship management, even if that's a relationship with yourself, like how to take care of yourself. So really just kudos to you. And I hope that y'all know what you're doing because y'all are doing amazing work. And now my next question is, and I have witnessed it a little going on, but what are the joys and pleasures of the work?

Katie: Great question. I think one thing that comes almost immediately to mind is witnessing the transformation of folks that we're working with whether it's partners, whether it's digital stewards, whether it's people that maybe attended one of our speaking engagements, but seeing either how folks are able to shift their perspective, ask a lot of new and different questions that maybe they normally wouldn't have, or thinking about the folks here in Detroit that are learning, you know, taking on completely brand new skill sets and really pushing themselves outside of their comfort zones to be a technologist in a way that they never thought was possible. That is an incredible joy. And, yeah, it's honestly one of my favorite things in life.

Tawana: Yeah, I'm gonna agree with Katie and say I never thought I would be excited about getting random messages on a regular basis from everyday people going like, "Did you read the article on facial recognition?" And these are people that wasn't thinking anything about facial recognition or surveillance, or looking up into the sky and pointing out drones, or any of the things that we're doing on our day to day. It might be the same people that were fussing at you and yelling at you at the Board of Police Commissioner meeting and telling you, "This is not the meeting for that." that will be the same ones that will see you on the street and say, "Girl, you know they putting up another one of them green light cameras, did you see that?" Just seeing, even if folks don't agree with you, seeing the interest in studying more, learning more about what's happening in the city around surveillance technologies, around pushing back against this conflation between safety and security or safety and surveillance. So, it just feels good to be in constant dialogue now with community members who are reading, even if it's the special edition of RiverWise's surveillance magazine and asking for additional copies, you know. Very recently I'm like "Why am I so excited about, like, why is this fun?" It's not like without... you know, it's with fear, too. There's fear, there's anxiety, there's trauma, there's pain sometimes but there is a benefit and a silver lining when you get to engage with community members who recognize the value in the work that you're doing and it encourages them to do their own study around what

you've said. Like, to be thinking critically about these systems so we're not telling people what to think. We're offering up the information and resources and people are biting into it and wanting to know more. I feel a tremendous sense of joy in that type of transformation.

Janice: Yeah, I think with EII people are always asking about the impact that our work has on the residents who are receiving internet access. Some of them for the very first time. But also, you know, looking at what impact this has had on the people who are doing this work like the Digital Stewards, for example. It's been really wonderful to see their growth and how they have expanded and how they've enhanced their skills, both through trainings that we've given them and then trainings that they've done on their own. We've seen quite a few stewards who were not interested in talking at all, more introverted, not really comfortable with the tech piece. We've seen them since move into more leadership roles. They've become leaders on their team. They're leading trainings and workshops within their communities. Some of the ones who weren't comfortable with technology in the beginning are building new devices. They're using drills now. They're cutting wood and they're going on rooftops. So, it's been really wonderful to see the transformation that has taken place and the people that do this work.

Leon: Thank you. You all were speaking to transformation and I think that's cool to take a moment. Y'all are all doing some kind of transformational work and some alchemy in the city. Alright, so let's get, I guess, more into the nitty gritty of the work. We're coming off of a wave of strategy sessions and meetings and retreats for the planning of the new year. So what are y'all most excited to get into this year?

Tawana: Whew. So, we also convene the Detroit Digital Justice Coalition and we're organizing a couple of data... well, census DiscoTechs, DiscoTech being a play on words for discovering technology. We're going to do a lot of information around the upcoming census. Not telling folks that they have to complete the census, but responding to the questions that we've been receiving about the census. Working with D3, Data Driven Detroit, to develop the materials and we now have a census portal and other resources so that community members can go into the census process well-informed. So, we have that going on. Of course, we're continuing our work in resisting mass surveillance in the city, that being the massive pursuit to expand Project Greenlight. We're collaborating with coalition members like Freedom Freedom Growers, Blackout Green Light, Green Light Black Futures Coalition, which is part of BYP100, ACLU, Detroit Justice Center, and the Boggs Center to implement an initiative called Green Chairs, not Green Lights. It's asking residents to come back to the front porches, to bring your chairs to the front porch. I mean, they don't technically have to be green, but it'd be cool. So, one of the arguments for initiatives like Project Greenlight's mass surveillance and facial recognition tends to be sex trafficking as an example, right. We're saying that if you actually sit on your porch and watch children go to school you could actually prevent the crime, rather than wait for the

surveillance technology to *potentially* capture a person after the child has already been kidnapped. And so, just thinking about the ways that we can, as Janice and Katie were both saying, build/rebuild these relationships, re-spirit community members, let children in the city know we're looking out for them, push back against this notion that we want to be watched, push to be seen. Just a lot of opportunities to relationship build, innovate new technologies, humanize the ones that currently exist, and push back against surveillance as the way that we keep each other safe.

Leon: Yeah, I wanted to comment really quickly that it's interesting, Green Chairs, not Green Lights, and you connecting that to sex trafficking, right. Because I think that people have this kind of knee-jerk reaction to preventing harm and criminalization with more tech, right: "How can we surveil more, what can we use against our own communities?" And to make that connection, right. I think a lot of people don't realize that this work spans so many different arenas. But, also, that tech isn't always the answer. I just wanted to highlight that.

Tawana: Yeah, it's definitely a pause to ask, number one, why are we innovating in the first place. And, number two, what are the things we can do to tap into the indigeneity of organizing, the returning back to nature, returning back to relationship, returning back to community, because we have those things here, right. And so, even as we push for access, which Janice will talk more about, but even as we push for access, how do we push for more equitable relationships, relationships that don't criminalize our communities, relationships that don't push a social credit system that is going to marginalize people that are already suffering under poverty, already suffering under a narrative that's dehumanizing. Really, if you know who lives next door to you, if you have your porch light on, if you see the child get on the school bus, your chances of having a safer neighborhood far exceed any chance you would have having the police surveil your community. So, we have historical memory. Some of us have lived here and experienced it before having police in every area of the neighborhood. I think that it's a prime opportunity to revisit those examples that we know create safety.

Leon: Yeah. Thank you for that. Janice, Katie?

Katie: That gave me goosebumps.

Tawana: I was getting a little twisted, nervous because Leon is such a great host.

Katie: That's true. Yeah, definitely. I'm looking forward to some of the work that Leon is going to be bringing to the table. But, I think you know we are coming out of a period of really stabilizing. We had a big season of change and as you stated, coming out of all of these very intensive and intentional retreats. I think all of us walked out pounds lighter just knowing, yes, we are renewed and reaffirmed in our partnerships and this work. And I'm very, very, very much looking forward to seeing how we better operationalize a lot of the conversations we've been having. Also how these discussions will impact some of our existing partnerships and really better help us identify what other partnerships to pursue. I don't want to give too much away about the partnerships. Gotta save some, you know, some interest. But, we are also I think at a place where, this may not be exciting for other people, but I come from a communications and marketing background and we are really poised to up the ante on our communications and to be better stewards of our own story and to share with folks in more exciting way all of the progress that we are making. But, also what we're up against and what we envision as the world that we are actively creating together.

Janice: What I'm looking forward to, as we're hopefully heading closer and closer to spring, as part of EII, is connecting more homes. So, getting more residents onto the networks, which means more people getting access to the internet. I'm looking forward to teaching our neighborhoods and residents about our solar charging stations. We had those put into place. We have five locations and they were put up last year. I'm really looking forward to some community sessions around those charging stations. I'm looking forward to the resiliency work that we're gonna be working on this year to make our neighborhoods more resilient and better prepared for emergencies and disasters. Looking forward to working with our partners, like at 123net. They've been incredible partners to us. They really love our work and they're going to come in and support our digital stewards in enhancing their tech skills. Looking forward to supporting our anchor organizations and coming up with strategies on how to sustain these networks for the long term. Also, going out and just speaking about the work. Last year, Tawana and I separately did a lot of speaking engagements and this year we have quite a few on the calendar where she and I are going out and speaking together where she talks about her research and the harmful technologies that are present here. Then I talk about EII as being this wonderful and innovative alternative. So, I'm looking forward to those things.

Leon: It's an exciting year. Y'all got feet on necks all 2020!

Tawana: With Stilettos!

Leon: Yeah, so it's really exciting. How would y'all keep talking about this current moment for DCTP and where is it on the clock of the world?

Tawana: Oh, Okay. I'll take that one first. I was just, as you were asking the question, thinking of Grace Lee Boggs and I was thinking about how she would call this an opportunity in a crisis and that every crisis breeds opportunity. We're knee deep in crises. We really are. I mean, we got the election, we've got the fear around the census, legitimate fear and anxiety around the census. We have just all the things, environmental crises. We have a crisis of mass surveillance and all these things, but we also have a hell of a lot of opportunities, a lot of motivation to create those opportunities, a lot of motivation to revisit examples of opportunities that have already been innovated. We're really deep into coalition building. We have so many relationships that we haven't even tapped into the depths of what those relationships can be, contemporaneously with being freaked out. We're also super excited at the same time and so, you know, we come in and we're like, "F." This thing is happening. But, also, "woot!", we got the solution. You know we got this. So yeah. The children at the Boggs School would call it solutionaries. We're solutionaries.

Janice: Yeah, I'm where Tawana is. I see just a lot of opportunities. There's a lot of people that are really excited about the work that we're doing. We get tons of calls and lots and lots of emails from people asking, "How do you do this work? How can I build a community network where I live?" I see a lot of excitement around that. And when I tell people, you know, because they'll call and they'll be really excited about the tech portion and then I'll have to calm them down or slow them down and tell them and say, "Well you know EII is about four years old and it took many years to build the current relationships that already exist." And after I tell them how long it took and how much work actually goes into that, many of them are still excited about doing this work. So, you can tell what's really important to them is providing access and not just building out tech for people. Yeah, I'm just excited. And people are excited about us expanding throughout Michigan and then nationally and internationally.

Katie: I'm very happy to echo all of that excitement. I think one other, I guess, clocking point, if that makes sense, as I said a bit earlier... we've kind of, what's the word I want, ascended from 2019? Maybe that's a little dramatic.

Tawana: imagine the movie "Ghost."

Janice: We're like a phoenix.

Tawana: Rising from the ashes.

Katie: [Jokingly] I was not going for "Ghost." What I am getting at is, I think, that it's a very precious, precious moment where all of the work that has been put into our two core programs is coming to, finally, the point where we are able to leverage more and more resources, including our own capacity, but also some new funding, hopefully, wink wink, to really better integrate our two programs and that alone amplifies our potential for impact. We've already made some great strides in terms of bridging some of the DataJustice work into the digital stewards curriculum for EII, but there's a lot of work to be done to really ensure that we are walking that walk, talking that talk. I'll speak for myself, but I am extremely excited about that and I'm looking at y'all. You're excited.

Tawana: We're excited, too.

Leon: They're thinking about all the emails that are going to be required.

Katie: But, why I use the word precious is because as we're able to apply more energy and attention to that intent, I think, going back to all of the coalition building and relationship and trust building that we've been talking about, we do have a lot of potential to undergird some of the other movements here in the city. So, whether that looks like sharing our approach to community organizing, or teaching and training, or whether that looks amplifying some of the work that's being done towards equitable development in the city and community benefits ordinances that [are] actually for the people. That might even look like more intentional partnership around our resiliency strategy with some of the work other environmental justice organizations are doing. I think there is a lot of very promising intersectionality that we are finally at a point to really activate and run with.

Leon: Absolutely. And I think that another piece of the work that we do and engage with that is immaterial is narrative work and a lot of changing people's perceptions and images. What are

the narratives that y'all are trying to intervene on? What are their dangers and what is the new narrative being built?

Tawana: Whew! So, let me say you speaking my language, Leon. So, I'm 43 years old. I'm a yelder, you know, young elder, and my entire life in Detroit there has been one particular dominant, negative narrative. Anywhere in the world that I've traveled folks have had one ideology about Detroit. A hopeless, helpless, impoverished city of black folks who don't care about their property and is full of crime. And so, even if there are areas where components of that might be true, there's rarely ever a root cause analysis. There's rarely ever any attention to those neighborhoods being underserved, the fact that half of the city is at or below the poverty line, that the average income in the city is under \$27,000 a year. We're trying to, through the Data Justice work, through the Equitable Internet Initiative, through DCTP overall, we're trying to push back on a narrative that would offer up surveillance. It leads back to feeling like the city government has to surveil and contain and incarcerate and criminalize all of these residents based on a few pockets of folks who are responding to quality of life issues and feeling like they can't sustain their life. They don't have water. They don't have secure housing. They don't have grocery stores in their neighborhoods. Water has been poisoned. Or, just other quality of life issues that you come up against in a city where you're not resourced. The schools are closed. The rec centers are inadequate or closed. Just pushing back, again, the narrative that surveillance and security is not safety and putting forward a narrative that if you invest in a newer neighborhood, if you resource a neighborhood, if you make water affordable and accessible, if you ensure that folks have clean water, if you ensure that folks have viable housing, grocery stores, rec centers, there's evidence to prove that if you resource a neighborhood, as in any neighborhood, we have models all across the state of Michigan that show how vibrant and thriving neighborhoods are when they have the resources. And so, there just hasn't been an interest because Detroit is predominantly black. There hasn't been an interest to make sure that our neighborhoods have those resources and we constantly have city governments saying we don't have money for this, we don't have money for that, but they tend to find all the resources they need for surveillance, for different technologies to capture and surveil and criminalize and detain. They tend to find money for those sorts of things. So, just pushing back on the narrative that that is the way you reduce crime, that that is the way you look out for each other.

Leon: Yeah, you were hinting it a little, but I just wanted to say explicitly, the state of policing only exists because there is a propaganda narrative, right, that police push out that you're not safe. They do incredible amounts of fear mongering and they do a lot of misreporting about why people actually behave the way they do. So the reason why they can get away with convincing people to betray their interest with surveillance is because they're pushing out narratives that we need them to keep ourselves safe and we don't.

Tawana: I'd like to also add that, a lot of this is getting less and less now, but a lot of the officers in Detroit are black and a lot of them grew up in a city internalizing the same dominant, negative narrative that I did. I know a lot of officers that are my age, or a little bit older, have internalized that Detroit is dangerous. Detroit is a city that thinks the only way to reduce crime is to contain and capture. If you are trained up in that system within law enforcement to think that, then the media images are saying that, then you have a city does disinvested in at the same time, where is the outlet for those folks to get a different narrative? That's where we come in and we have to consistently do the study and lift up the opportunities and the examples that show that this has not worked. So whenever I'm encountering a city that's like, "Well, we'll just get a black police force and we'll just get a civilian oversight body and then that'll solve all the things," I tell them we have all those things and that does not solve the crises. What solves the crises is investing in humans turning to one another, making sure there's all the things that I named earlier. Detroit has been a model of things not to do and has also been a model of things to do and we're still working towards the future that we deserve.

Leon: Are there things y'all want to add, Katie or Janice?

Janice: Yeah, I think to go along with what Tawana is saying and in that vein, one of the narratives that's really been coming up for me lately is that Detroit has an adoption problem as it relates to technology. Not an Internet access problem, but an adoption problem. And they think that if you give a person a mobile device that will solve all of their technological challenges. One, they could have Internet access or they could not. But, adoption just, you know, it doesn't actually level the playing field. It does create more opportunities for them to search for jobs, participate in online education courses, find city or government resources, or read the news. But, I think there are also other systems at play, especially in Detroit. Like Tawana mentioned, the median income is around \$26,000. It's also about the affordability of the Internet. Detroit is an urban area and a lot of the funding at the federal and state levels are going to the rural areas because those are the areas that are considered to be unserved. Detroit is considered to be this underserved area when, actually, there are many parts of the city that are unserved. It's not just that people can't afford it or are choosing not to get internet, it's actually an affordability problem. It's an issue with digital redlining, about ISPs not operating in certain areas because it's not profitable or because there's a certain ethnic group that lives there. It's also an issue with disinvestment with our communities. The communities that EII works in are considered low income. And that's a code phrase for a community with people of color. So when they talk about "Detroit is coming back, there's this resurgence happening here," the truth is it's only really happening in certain neighborhoods.

Leon: And for certain people.

Janice: Exactly. And those are the two narratives that really come to the top of the mind for me. We've been trying to challenge that with, "Detroit actually has an Internet access problem."

Katie: Yeah, thank you. I think I've been thinking about, really, and it was already referenced, but the idea of who can successfully own a career in tech, who tech is for. I think that that is one of the primary narratives that we are actively pushing back against every day. And, you know, we see it, of course, in a lot of our immediate work, but also as things continue to play out in the development realm. We are continuing to hear these stories, these headlines, about entity X bringing in the technology, the innovators, the experts. We get it from all sides it seems. By virtue of our work, we are really striving to showcase and highlight the experts that are here in our neighborhoods, the folks that can figure the tech out and expound on it and teach others about it in a way that traditional academia never could. And I think, too, it's just the classic narrative of Detroit coming back. As you said Tawana, it never left. And it won't because of the people that are here and are invested and are really making all these moves on their own. All we're trying to do is bolster their skill sets and their access to different types of education, resources, and other materials.

Tawana: Let me just tell you that whenever I hear "Detroit is coming back," I hear "Make America Great Again." And I don't know where the people who are listening to this podcast fit in politically, but if I'm looking at how a predominantly black city is or is not served, well neither political party has served our community in a way we deserve to be served, but both of those narratives create a slate that further marginalizes and invisibilizes black people, people of color, indigenous people. Anytime you're saying there's a coming back and there is a demographic that currently exists that has been disinvested in and racially targeted, that is something that has to be pushed back against. I feel a personal responsibility as a black woman, a black person, a black Detroiter, a mother, to stand in the gap and say, "hey!" Like Katie said, "We're here, we are here. We're not leaving and we're closest to the issues and we have the solutions to the problem. If you actually just get out of our way, and stop trying to put policies in place that further marginalize us and violate us and disenfranchise us, we could show you what a thriving city looks like."

Janice: Yeah, and provide the resources and funding for the organizing that has already been happening here.

Leon: Right. I think it's important to, kind of, clock these narratives because these narratives aren't accidental and I think that's their danger, right. Because they exist and people think that they're normal and that's what it was supposed to be and that's what's actually going on. But, they're actually strategic. And I think it speaks to what you all were talking about. Why are these narratives being pushed out, what's the strategy, what are they trying to advance. Y'all talk a lot about things being invisibilized. Why would the state be so concerned about rural areas as opposed to urban and it's perhaps, especially in this context in Michigan with Detroit, it is because Detroit is a primarily black city. It's one of the blackest cities in the whole country. And so to think that there is an adoption problem spins a narrative that black people actually just don't know what to do with the resources they're given, right.

Janice: The narrative says let's just give them an invite and a device so they can use it and get online and do whatever. Whereas, what we're trying to do is create producers of content. So not only do we want to give you internet access, but we want to give you the tools and resources to produce content that is relevant to you and your community and the challenges that you face.

Leon: Right. I think that the narrative around Detroiters actually being producers and people who govern the technology that benefits their community is so important because, like what you're saying Katie, is right now there is this idea that certain people are coming in with their tech innovation as if that has not been happening all the while, as if they're not people creating innovative solutions to meet their needs utilizing technology. And that's invisibilizing. The strategy there is for certain people who can make profit off of the development in Detroit.

Tawana: Right. Absolutely. And that's why spaces like Black Bottom Archives, RiverWise Magazine, the Allied Media Conference, prioritize media for liberation. Those are so important because of mainstream media. This podcast, WNUC, are alternative versions of the story and are gonna be so significant pushing for collective liberation, co-liberation, right. There is no incentive for mainstream media to prioritize our stories because that goes against the face of the blank slate. That goes against the narrative that Detroit is withering away if it isn't reinvested in with a whole entirely new demographic. Let's be clear, we want the investment, we want new vibrant, energetic residents to live in the city, but only if there is a respect for the people who exist here already. Only if there is a respect for indigenous history, only if there is a respect for the neighbors who are trying to hold onto their homes, and trying to get affordable water. We need more co-liberators. We need people who are going to move in to the city and who are going to fight for the collective energy of the city, the culture of the city, the residents who currently exist, the kids in the schools who need clean affordable water, who don't want to be surveilled. I just think that all these tools that we have, like Katie and Janice were saying, the

tools, and you were just saying, we just we also have the resistance happening to our tools. That's what needs to stop.

Leon: Wow. Thank you all for that. That was all really powerful. I guess I want to kind of close up this conversation. We spoke to it over the course of our time together, but if y'all had to just summarize and do some takeaways from the conversation, what does access to high speed internet, communication, digital safety, and data justice mean for Detroiters and what's at stake?

Katie: Everything. Should I say more? That's a very serious response. No, I mean, it's a host of opportunities, right, that we're talking about here. It's identity that we're talking about here. Pride, respect, and optimism for the future. When you are able to access information. When you're able to impact how your community exists in your neighborhood and how you interact with all of these various systems that are increasingly moving online, and you're able to do so in a mindful way that protects you from a lot of the harms out there that we learn about everyday, that's an absolute game-changer. And there's a lot of data out there, of course, everyone's talking about the homework gap. If kids can't do their homework, that's a very visible gap. It's a very measurable gap. But, it extends across all ages. And it's not something that the market is going to correct for, right? So ensuring that we are pooling our energies and ensuring that folks are experiencing real digital justice. I really do mean it's everything. And it will continuously grow in terms of the priority that is placed on it for folks to lead a happy and successful life.

Tawana: Asé. And we deserve to be seen... we deserve to be seen. We don't deserve to be watched. There is a long legacy of surveilling and profiling black bodies. It is imperative that Detroit stands in the gap, not just for Detroit, but for all the black bodies in smaller black cities all across the world. I'm constantly in conversation with organizers and technologists in cities and states and other countries. It's become very clear that if Detroit fails at this, if we fail at resisting these pervasive systems, then there isn't much hope for other black bodies in the United States. We are the largest black mecca left. We have 700,000 black bodies in Detroit. We need co-liberators. We need people from all over the world of all racial demographics, not just because it's Black History Month, but all throughout the year to be standing up for Detroit and standing with Detroit and resisting these dominant, negative narratives that have allowed for policy to dehumanize, marginalize, incarcerate, and and ostracize us.

Janice: I think what it means for Detroiters is the ability to fully participate in various systems that they've constantly and consistently been excluded from like the economy, communication, and education. I also think it means the inclusion and increased participation of people who have consistently been marginalized from those systems, like people of color, black people,

people who identify as women, people who identify as LGBTQIA and beyond, senior citizens, those who live in low income neighborhoods. I think what is at stake is them being able to fully participate in society, politically, in the economy, in the education system, in the census. It just means that a whole community's voice would be excluded from the conversation.

Leon: Mm hmm, yeah. It sounds like the stakes are really high, y'all! But, it also sounds like you are doing a lot of work. Y'all are dreaming, y'all are out here doing the nitty gritty, making the mistakes and learning from them. How can people best support the work moving forward?

Tawana: I mean, besides donations? No, you know, step into your power. You know what I mean? Coalition building is so significant and it's gonna be so much more important for folks to recognize where they can fit into all of this work. By no means do we think we hold all of it, right. We hold a small piece of what is possible. I hope that the courage that we are putting forward encourages Detroiters who might have not felt that their voices were significant to this point. I hope that we energize them and I hope that they lean on us for the resources that Katie was talking about, for the literature, coming to the discotechs. We have two discotechs coming up. One on February 29th and one on March 28th, I believe. They can of course follow us on all the social media pages and go to detroitcommunitytech.org and look at those events coming up. We'd love to be in conversation. Like, how can we encourage you to take the RiverWise magazines, to take the zines, to participate in the workshops and the exercises, and then empower yourself within your own community, to step into your piece of the work. Let's build it out. Let's get busy, y'all!

Leon: Do y'all have stuff to add?

Janice: I would say, and to add to what Tawana was saying, is to support the work of DCTP and EII is to also support the work of our partners in this work. So, Grace in Action, the North End Woodward Community Coalition, and Church of the Messiah. As part of their work within EII, they host trainings and workshops around various digital literacy topics and they also host monthly community meetings. A way to support them in their work is to attend their various events and trainings in the community.

Leon: Right. Thanks for shouting them out.

Katie: I think I would also add, especially for folks that maybe are not based here in Detroit, but even if you are, one of the best ways that you can support our work and work like ours is to pay attention. Really have a critical eye on the headlines that you're reading, look for propaganda loops. But, I think more importantly find those organizations near you that are invested in this type of work and connect with them. I think, too, we are also accepting love letters. It goes a long way just to keep your finger on the pulse, shout out people that you know are doing good work, support them however you can, whether it's on the ground, whether it's in a volunteer capacity, or with, I don't know, administrative support, or if it's really being a vocal advocate for what organizations like ours are facing. But more broadly, the policy that's coming up, the way that mass surveillance is moving so quickly, facial recognition is moving so quickly. Just do what you can to keep that finger on the pulse and then maybe you know put your foot down when you can and lend voice to those that are really on the front lines of all of these different types of oppression and systems that are bogging us down and threatening us. At the end of the day, your support for this work is whatever it means to you. We'll love you for it.

Leon: Well thank you all so much for finding time and letting me you probe y'all's minds. Y'all are amazing, magical, alchemists, world builders, dreamers. It's so nice to know that y'all are the ones who are directing the ship. I love y'all.

Katie: Thanks, Leon.

Tawana: Thank you.

Janice: Thanks, Leon.