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**Interview with Suzy Subways**

**Interviewed by Amaka Okechukwu**

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[Start of recorded material at 00:00]

Amaka Okechukwu: [00:00:00] I have some kind of first background identification questions -- so, name, those sorts of things. So, can you state your name?

Suzy Subways: Suzy Subways.

Amaka: And your age?

Suzy: I'm going to be 40 in May, so 39.

Amaka: How do you racially identify?

Suzy: White.

Amaka: How do you identify your gender?

Suzy: Female.

Amaka: How do you identify your sexual orientation?

Suzy: Oh man, that's a tough one. I usually identi-- I'm a has-bian.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs)

Suzy: I am all -- I don't know if that's -- that's very -- I'm, queer, can we just say -- well -- I'm queer but I -- past few years I've only dated men -- and I think it's just like a life course thing. But I can't say I'm straight, because that's not true either, and that's not me. So... (inaudible) would it be OK if I'm saying queer?

Amaka: Yeah, that's -- that's -- yeah. (laughs) Whichever way you choose it, that's cool. And your marital status?

Suzy: Single.

Amaka: And do you have any children?

Suzy: No.

Amaka: Okay, so can you describe where you were born and raised, and, like, the community that you grew up in?

Suzy: Yeah, sure. I was born in Washington, D.C., and until I was eight, I was raised in the suburbs in Maryland. My mom was a housewife, and my dad was a businessman. He went into the city. It was kind of like how you would see it in like, a T.V. sitcom. And we played outside a lot, it was cool in that we had a tight-knit community in that -- there was a woman who was a doctor -- it never struck me until later how unique this was. She was a Puerto Rican woman who was a doctor, in the late '70s, who would -- she lived a block away from us, and she was my mom's best friend. And we used to just go to the doctor by like walking up a hill, for like two minutes. And she was also -- her daughter was like our best friend, me and my sister's best friend. So, in that way there was -- it was a cool community. And I also think that suburbs are really fun for kids, because you can just play outside all the time, there's no gunshots flying around. It's really cool. And then when I lived in Virginia -- my mom left -- my parents are divorced, my dad got custody after like, a horrific custody battle. My mom left, and I didn't see her for a year. Then she moved to New York, and we moved to Virginia. And -- so me, my dad, and my sister moved to Virginia.

That was also a suburban -- you know -- classical -- you know, suburban, middle class... Maybe upper-middle class, I would say. My dad -- my dad has a lot of money. My mom got very poor after the divorce -- she lived in New York for a while, and we would go visit her, and I always wanted to live with her. I wanted to live in the city. I think that's partly why I ended up moving to New York, because I loved New York in the early '80s, and like, it was a magical place, and I just wanted to live there so bad, but... Oh, it didn't happen -- I -- I moved to Philly in 1990, when I was 16. My mom -- my mom was basically, like, in poverty ever since the divorce. And she lived in a little apartment in West Philly, and when I came to live with her, we moved up to Olney, which was like -- Nor -- it's North Philly, but not like the center of North Phil -- it's like, a little north. [Inaudible], if you're in Philly. But yeah -- I was -- it was really different for me. Yeah, I guess like growing up, it's interesting -- like, growing up like, we didn't -- once my mom left, we had no contact with the neighbors, whatsoever. My dad [inaudible] like -- we just didn't interact with anyone, and I didn't have any friends. It was horrible. (laughs) I can't really emphasize how horrible it was. And like it was like not having any friends, being completely isolated, and reading books all the time. And then when I moved to Philly, it was a very different -- I think I was more affected by community when I moved to Philly, because I got involved in activism and... I don't know, my mom and I lived in a big apartment building. There were -- it was a black neighborhood, we were white people. It was interes-- it was like a very different -- it was also like the height of the crack epidemic -- which was very intense, and we got robbed a couple times. It was very different, and -- I don't know, just seeing things that were happening around the world -- I don't know -- yeah --

Amaka: Well how did that impact your worldview? I mean, you know, moving -- kind of living in such drastically different environments, you know, at a young age, like -- how -- how do you think they may have shaped or impacted your worldview? At the time, I guess.

Suzy: Yeah, well, it's interesting, because I was like -- you know, because I was so shy, I just lived in books, you know, as a kid, and music. [00:05:00] And part of the reason I moved to Philly, was I was tired of being like sheltered, and -- there was all this stuff going on in the world, you know, like the Berlin Wall came down, the Cold War was ending, and I thought there wasn't going to be any war anymore, and you know and then like the Tiananmen Square, and I just saw all these -- signs of resistance everywhere. I was actually, like -- I was ready to be an activist, like way before I moved to Philly. (laughs) And like when I was 16, I just -- it somehow, I don't know like -- I was always, like... I always had battles with authority. You know, my father, the teachers, everything. And, I think -- even though I was a straight-A student, but I was always getting in trouble for just being (laughs) combative with the teachers. But, I think like, part of moving to Philly, like -- it fit -- you know, I was pretty sheltered, and like -- there were two things about it, right? Like, just wanting to live in a city where there's way more going on. There's just way -- like, a lot of different cultures and ideas. But also, there was something about living in a black neighborhood that was, like -- I mean, I had seen Do the Right Thing, and it was like -- it was really intense for me, and I grew up like -- I don't know, like just -- I was, I was -- I grew up in like a very privileged, very white, kind of racist, like -- sometimes openly racist environment. And, to me, I think -- I think at that time it was, for me, also just like another form of rebellion. It was very distant and kind of objectifying -- it was like, "Why don't I go to Philly, and like do something totally opposite of what I'm supposed to be doing?" And see what it's like for people were totally different from me, who are being kind of fucked over by society. And then -- (inaudible) and I think I romanticized it.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: Yeah, I mean, maybe -- (laughs) I was, like, just basically living in my head, you know? And so, when I went to -- yeah, the impact of moving here was like -- the main impact was just like, I had friends, you know? I ha-- I went to a public school, I had been to private school in Virginia. And it was a magnet school that I went to here in Philly, and it was just like, for people from all over the city and -- you know, it was its own privileged environment, but, like, to me it was totally, like, opposite of the private school I went to, because -- you know, in the South -- a Southern, like, very elite private school. (laughs)

Amaka: Right.

Suzy: It was like, if you were Jewish, you stuck out. If you were Asian, you stuck out. It was like -- very intense place, and a lot of the white people were descended from, like, major plantation owners and shit like that.

Amaka: Wow.

Suzy: So, like, anyway. Kind of rambling on, I don't know if I'm answering your questions. (laughs)

Amaka: Yeah! No, you are, you are. How would you describe your parents, like, politically, growing up?

Suzy: Okay, yeah. My dad and my grandma, when I was growing up, were really right-wingers, like... My grandma partially raised me after my mom left, and she -- I mean, she had a huge impact on me politically just by being this total -- like, a very mean person. And she would say that my mom was never coming back, and that -- you know, basically --

Amaka: Oh, goodness.

Suzy: -- she was just a mean person, combined with being racist, being anti-feminist, being just a total right-winger. It just -- I hated everything she stood for. (laughs) So it was kind of (inaudible) -- and my mom being, you know, part of her leaving was feminism, you know, she -- I remember she showed us this movie, *The Stepford Wives*. You know? (laughs) Like, the original one. (laughs)

Amaka: Yeah, I've seen it. (laughs)

Suzy: It is really intense! And I saw it when I was like seven, and mom said, "This is what it's like being married to your father."

Amaka: Oh, God.

Suzy: (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs)

Suzy: Yeah, so, I think that I developed a very intense feminist consciousness from my mom, and then my dad's an environmental -- my dad's a conservative, but he's, you kn-- pro-choice, and he's an environmentalist. So, I think that, like, my gateway to activism was, like, environmentalism, because when I was 16, I refused to learn how to drive, which was a huge deal in the suburbs in Virginia. Luckily I moved to Philly, and it wasn't an issue. My mom didn't have a car, we just used the subway, you know, it was great. But... What was the question? (laughs)

Amaka: Oh no, you answered it. I was just asking you to describe your parents politically. So yeah.

Suzy: So -- okay. Cool.

Amaka: Okay, so -- so you're in Philly, you're a teenager. At what point do you get to New York? Like, how does that happen?

Suzy: Right. Well, I went to college -- [00:10:00] I went to three different colleges, so... You know, basically...

Amaka: Did you go to college directly after high school? Or did you take time off, or...?

Suzy: Oh, I went to -- I went to Antioch right after high school, it's in Ohio, and I stayed there for two years. Then I was in San Francisco for a couple months. And then I moved to New York, I went to Eugene Lang College at the New School. For a year -- I transferred -- so I transferred in -- I moved to New York in January of '95. And immediately, I started going to -- this anarchist study group that was meeting at Blackout Books, and it was run by Love and Rage people. Like Chris Day. As soon as I met those folks, I was like really excited, and -- I had been active as an anarchist, for, you know, since I was 16. But I -- these folks were really friendly (laughs), and so I -- I, coincidentally, also got involved in, well... I basically got involved in the CUNY Coalition immediately after moving to New York.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: But -- I had maybe done like anti-war organizing, like -- when I was 16, the way I became an activist was organizing against the Gulf War.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: In the citywide coalition in Philly, and organizing at my high school, against the war. And then we were organizing against the voucher bill -- the school voucher bill, at my high school. And then from then on I was, like -- I was basically an activist, like -- that was my life, from when I was 16. So, when I moved to New York, I just kind of sought out -- that was actually part of why I moved to New York, because I wanted to be in a town where I felt like there was a lot going on. Because in Philly, it was like -- there were some good organizations -- it's the same way now, like -- you know, the left has been in a low point for a very long time. (laughs)

Amaka: Yes.

Suzy: (laughs) And I just really wanted something I could sink my teeth into, and, like, immediately after I moved to New York, it was very clear -- I thought I was going to be involved in prison stuff, because, you know, the, you know -- you know, '94 to '96 was right when, like, some very extreme laws were being passed around mass imprisonment, and it was -- I just like -- that was something I really wanted to work on, but -- when I came across the CUNY Coalition, it just, like -- it was just incredible.

Amaka: How -- as a -- so you were saying that you had been, like, an anarchist since you were a teenager. How did that even come about? Like, in terms of -- were you just, did you just read, or you heard about it, or, like, how did you first become exposed to anarchism as a teenager? Or do you remember?

Suzy: Yeah, yeah -- it's kind of two things, I feel like -- Philly has a really strong anarchist community, and it always has. And I think, like -- part of it was just that, you know, in the anti-war coalition in Philly, in 1990, there were so many -- it was like the alphabet soup of all these different Trotskyite groups, and all of them were trying to recruit me, and -- I was mentored by this guy through the Young Communist League. He was a Stalinist, and he was 30, but he was still in the Young Communist League. And he was, like, I couldn't shake him, but the great thing was, like -- he was always there, he was always, like, hanging out with me and my best friend. And he was so cool. Like, he was such a good mentor. And I learned so much from him. I think that what happened was I was kind of --

more about, like, individual freedoms, and stuff. Like -- I actually was kind of anarcho-primitivist, like just by -- this is really embarrassing (laughs)... There was this Talking Heads song about, like, "Let's get rid of everything and go back to nature." And I was like, "That's exactly what we need to do." You know, this was when I was like 15. And I was, like, fuck -- you know, I'm never going to learn how to drive, fuck this, we need to just raze it all to the ground, and let the forest come back. Then when I moved to Philly, it was like -- you know, I came face to face with a lot of realities -- my mom was unemployed, and we were getting food stamps and all this stuff -- and I remember Mike -- Mike Simonian, my mentor, the communist -- he was like, look at this situation. Like -- he really woke me up to the economic issues. And so, I think that, like, being anarchist was like, somewhat in between those two things. I couldn't go so far as to being a communist, but I wasn't going to be like a libertarian, or like a [00:15:00] bad -- you know, who knows what I was going to be doing, but -- I mean, coming from a privileged environment, you just kind of have a skewed idea of the world, and I think being in Philly helped me, um -- so I was -- and you know, and then, I started listening to punk rock. I never was involved with punk music as a teenager, or in my 20s. But I liked the music, and there was always talk of anarchy in it, you know, so --

Amaka: Right, right. Okay.

Suzu: I think I was like -- I just had like a visceral, like connection, but -- but, in West Philly, there were all these an-- there was the Wooden Shoe -- oh, Alexis Buss. She went to my high school, and she staffed at the Wooden Shoe, which is the anarchist bookstore. And she was, like -- yeah, I've been rambling on and on -- she's probably the reason I'm an anarchist.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzu: She -- she was in ACT UP, and she was bisexual, and like, to me, I was like -- "Whoa!" I didn't know there was such a thing. And she was just really cool, and kind of androgynous, and it was the height of the AIDS epidemic, and she used to hand out condoms in front of the high school, and -- yeah, so I would go to the Wooden Shoe, the anarchist bookstore, and I would see her staffing, and she would tell me what books were cool, and --

Amaka: Okay! So, you're -- so you're in New York, you start to get involved in the CUNY Coalition. Do you remember -- do you remember how you first kind of heard about the CUNY Coalition? Or how you -- you know, first -- yeah, were hearing that stuff was going on, and -- can you describe kind of your initial involvements in the CUNY Coalition?

Suzu: Yeah, so -- it really was when I went to Albany for this lobby day -- I mean, I didn't believe in lobbying, but there was this -- what was happening, they were bringing back the death penalty to New York state. And I was -- I just felt so devastated by that, and -- so I went on a bus with a bunch of people to this -- [inaudible] -- and I think -- there was an in-between period, maybe other people were off lobbying, and I didn't want to lobby. (laughs) But anyway, I saw this big protest of students who were really just like -- had a lot of energy, were moving quickly, like hundreds of students. And, like, they were headed right for the capitol building. And I remember -- I just kind of stumbled into this, and -- they were across the street from the capitol building, in front of me, and, like, the building was to my left, and a crowd of people to my right, in front of me, and I saw that there were like four cops on horses or something, in front of the capitol building. And I knew that this crowd was just going to run up the steps and go in the building. And I was like, "Hell yeah!" And I just kind of joined in, and -- we ran into the building, and started running around in the hallway, and -- I realized that this was -- these were the CUNY students. And the SUNY students too -- and it was just, like -- I just felt, like, finally there was a way to let the government know how I felt. (laughs) That would actually, like, be -- you know, that would actually do it justice. You know, to just be like, "Actually, we should be running this, because we would run it a lot better. And things need to be equitable, and you need to stop, you know -- like, basically exploiting us and then giving us nothing, and blaming us." You know, it just felt like a very cathartic moment. And I wanted to be part of that movement. And then when I got back to New York that night, it was actually the night of my anarchist study group with Chris Day, and he -- he had been there that day, too. And he also felt, like, totally inspired. And he said, "You should come to the CUNY Coalition meeting." And I was, like, "Oh, man, I don't know if I should, because, you know... I'm a private school student." And he said, "Well, you know, there are private school students involved." And when I went, it was -- it was interesting, because, you know, the -- it didn't seem to represent the -- the demographics of the people who had, you know, stormed the state capitol? It was like -- I just felt like it was more white, older... And that really struck me, when I went to the CUNY Coalition meetings. And the meetings were generally always like that -- even though they got really big later, it got big -- within a month, you started to get a few like -- over a hundred people, maybe two hundred people.

Amaka: Wow.

Suzu: But it was still mostly white people -- I don't know, it was interesting. That was what struck me first, and then what struck me more was just how radical it was. (laughs) It was so exciting. It -- the meetings were so exciting.

Amaka: So, in terms of the -- in terms of the CUNY Coalition meetings -- I mean, how would you describe -- like, I've heard of them as being, [00:20:00] like, kind of chaotic, (laughs) -- I don't know if that's the case, but like, can you describe how, you know, like what it felt like to be at the meetings? I mean, how were decisions made? Did people kind of vote individually, like with hands? Were there blocs, like -- do you remember kind of the -- you know, the dynamics of the CUNY Coalition meetings?

Suzy: Yeah -- this was really before I had ever encountered consensus -- I don't think we really used consensus -- it was really, it was very chaotic, that's for sure. People were very passionate, and it just felt so real. Everything felt like we weren't just trying to go through the motions, we weren't just trying to like, have a successful event, we were trying to defeat the budget cuts, and people felt like we could, and people had very strong opinions about what would defeat the budget cuts. And what would build, like, a revolutionary movement -- I mean, like, more than half the people in the room wanted to build a revolutionary movement in New York City that could catch fire worldwide -- you know, it was a huge ambition. I think the way that -- okay, so, the meetings, they grew and grew in size, and got longer and longer, and I remember being in five-hour meetings --

Amaka: Oh!

Suzy: -- where, just -- (laughs) --

Amaka: (laughs)

Suzy: -- people were yelling all at the same time, and I remember it, because not even once, but like three or four times where someone would be yelling "Call the question!" -- "Just call the question!" Because, it's like -- everyone's yelling at once, and there was something that needed to be voted on, so -- we're still debating and debating and debating... So, they'd be like, "Call the question!" And then I believe we just raised our hands, and like it had to be a majority. I am not sure, though. I don't -- and I just read my journal again from that time, and I didn't have any notes about that.

Amaka: Was there, like, a facilitator?

Suzy: Yeah. There'd usually be two faci-- like, two co-facilitators. And, usually they were people who were kind of experienced. But sometimes -- you know, we were really just trying to do total direct democracy, I mean, there wasn't -- we didn't use that word. I don't think that I knew that term at the time, but -- anyway, like, you know it would just be two people facilitating, and sometimes we would try to -- and I say we, but I was a very small, very quiet-- I don't think I ever -- I hardly ever said anything. I was an extremely shy person, at the time and I was not -- but, you know, "we" because I was in the room -- I can say -- but the group really wanted to have, like new people get trained in facilitation. And so maybe like a more experienced facilitator would be paired with someone who was new. Because they'd never facilitated before. Especially if they came from a college -- a CUNY college that was not, you know, well-represented at the meetings.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: But it would be kind of chaotic -- like, sometimes we'd have, like -- I remember one time there was someone who had never facilitated before, and I think people were -- (inaudible) Well, I'm not sure -- this is a tangent, I could go on a tangent.

Amaka: No, go -- that's fine. That's okay. (laughs)

Suzy: Well, there was this guy who I think that -- I had a big argument with people in Love and Rage about it later, because, I thought, like -- you know, they were older than me, and way more experienced, and I was extremely shy, and I just never -- it took me years to -- this, it was through SLAM! and Love and Rage that I realized, that, I have a responsibility to change things, I can't just rely on other people to fix everything. You know, I have to build my confidence, stuff like that. So, I was mad at, basically Chris and Carolyn I think, because, you know, they were not -- and Carolyn was also a Love and Rage member who was in SLAM! -- it was the CUNY Coalition at that time -- I think it was must have been like February '95. Like, it was before the big protest, I think.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: [And more?] -- I felt like they should've told this guy he was being sexist, but -- they said they couldn't do it -- it was like -- it was this young black man, who I don't think had ever facilitated before, and was new to activism, and he was like... Putting -- he would call on women by saying, like -- I don't remember what -- like, "baby" or something? And then -- cut them off, and stuff? (laughs) And I remember, like, Carolyn and people talking about it afterwards and how it was kind of fucked up, but -- and I was like, "Why didn't you say anything -- why didn't you stop that?" And -- Carolyn was like, "Well I'm -- you know, I'm intimidated by these meetings, too, like, there's only two women who ever talk in these meetings, and that's Sandra and Lenina."

Amaka: Mmmm. [00:25:00]

Suzy: And it just -- I was like, how could -- I thought I was the only one who was ever nervous, or scared, or shy, you know. And, like, they were talking about the dynamics, and wanting to bring in people who were, like from the colleges that weren't represented as well as Hunter, and Brooklyn, and City College, and. And I felt like they were

being patronizing -- maybe not even pa-- I just thought they should stand up for women. It was an interesting -- I felt like, you know, looking back -- I think it's great what they did. What the group did, you know? And it wasn't easy, and sometimes people didn't -- they didn't stand up for what they believed in, but it's like. I don't know. It was like very, very complicated.

Amaka: Can you -- were you at the big rally, the big protest at City Hall?

Suzy: Yeah.

Amaka: Can you describe, I guess, how -- like, how you experienced that, and -- I mean, I don't know if you remember any of like, the planning that was involved, you know? Like, what preceded the big rally, so can you kind of just speak to, kind of what, I guess, preceded it, and then your experience, you know, there?

Suzy: Yeah, it was just this incredible sense of momentum, and like all this shit was happening like -- even like Mayor -- not mayor, Governor Pataki -- was somewhere -- I think students -- CUNY students -- SUNY students. SUNY students jumped on his car or some big sh-- it was just like, like there was just this level of militancy on a massive level, like... I don't know, I think it was just like a mass number of students ready to do militant action, we were just seeing it. And it just felt like we needed to push for the most radical thing possible for this protest. So, it was -- I mean, I, you know, Chris was like my buddy in this coalition -- and, you know, he was like a leader, and like... I was just very quiet, sitting by myself. But, he was the person who I looked to for leadership. And he and Jed were really pushing for this, shut the city down, no-permit, you know, no negotiating with the police... And people were mostly into it. But I remember this one moment, it was like -- there was this guy from The Militant newspaper -- I mean, there were all these, like he was from the Young Socialist Alliance. There were so many of those groups that were in the meetings. I think that's why it was so chaotic a lot of the time, because there were all these Trotskyite groups that -- I mean, I normally don't have anything (inaudible) bad to say against Trotsky's thinking or anything, but -- when I was younger, there were so many of these fucking groups that were so dogmatic, and they were completely out of touch, and they'd be like... Oh yeah, there was -- there were people yelling "General strike!" in the meetings, they would be like -- there would be, you know, conversation happening, things were going forward, and someone would just start yelling "General strike! General strike!" --

Amaka: Oh no...

Suzy: And it would be like, you know, upheavals of everybody yelling. And like, "Shut up!" You know.

Amaka: (laughs)

Suzy: I mean... (laughs) So there were all these various socialist groups, and I remember this one guy from the Young Socialist Alliance saying -- from The Militant newspaper, he was saying -- and he always used to hold the newspapers up, just in case anyone wanted to buy one, they would just have it draped over their arm, or whatever. Always trying to sell their newspaper. And so, he was like, you know, "We really shouldn't, you know, we should get a permit because, like, we don't know what's going to happen." And Chris turned around and was like, "You're from The Hesitant, right?" (laughs) Something about, "The Hesitant," you know, making fun of his newspaper. So, it -- got really intense, like... It was, like, just -- it -- but, at the same time, it just seemed like, you know, the people that were our constituency were ready. There was huge momentum. So, I don't know, that was what we were hoping -- we were hoping, basically, that we would get tons of people, that we would have a brief rally at City Hall, you know. As far as I was concerned, you know, Chris was saying -- "We can't let the speakers go on and on, we have to leave City Hall soon, or we'll get surrounded by the police." The idea was that we would kind of just like march down, you know, to Wall Street, and like, kind of trash the Financial Di-- I mean --

Amaka: So that was -- that was planned before time -- like, ahead of time. Because I -- so, so, the actual march was something that you guys had already discussed and were planning on doing.

Suzy: Yeah, yeah, we were going to march on Wall Street, and it's interesting, because people who I've interviewed have said things kind of differing, but... You know, I'll just say how I remember it. We were going to march on Wall Street, and we were -- we had, like -- it was [00:30:00] kind of an informal meeting of anarchists before -- a couple nights before, and we had these maps of the Financial District, and where various, like, banks were, institutions, the stock exchange. And we talked about things like setting garbage cans on fire, and like, you know, putting them in the middle of the street and -- I don't remember talking about smashing windows, but, just kind of setting things -- yeah. Setting garbage cans on fire, (laughs) that's the main thing I remember. I was like, "Ooh," you know, I had been an anarchist, but I had never been involved in anything like that. And -- you know, in the Financial District, and it just sounded so great. And I remember Chris saying, um -- we want them to feel like the barbarians are at the gates. (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs) Wow. So how -- I mean, so how -- so -- you know, that was the experience planning it, and the momentum that was building up to it. What was it like being a part of it? Like, I -- you know, I've heard that, you know -- I mean, I don't -- I've heard different things, I've heard that like, you know, that for a while the speakers seemed like they were kind of going on forever, and then, you know, folks broke out and started marching, and I've

heard kind of various (laughs) things, and, you know, from different people. So, like, how -- how do you remember experiencing the march and the police response, and the amount of people that were out there, and just the energy?

Suzy: Yeah, yeah, I mean, it was really like, the most important thing in my life, and I remember feeling that way while it was happening. And it was just -- it was way more people than we expected. And we expected a lot of people. And then I remember -- yeah, I mean I personally didn't -- I didn't feel like I was making anything happen in particular, I didn't -- I don't remember if we had affinity groups, or what, but -- I just remember following Chris around, honestly. This whole period of my life, I just kind of followed Chris around.

Amaka: (laughs) Okay.

Suzy: So -- but -- (laughs). I remember -- yeah, I do remember the speakers going on for a while. Oh! While we were still at City Hall Park, we basically covered all the grounds, all the area of City Hall Park, and then a lot of people were in the street, too, because there was just so many people. And just kind of packed in, but not too tight. And I noticed there were all these -- okay, there were four flags that were up in City Hall Park, right in front of City Hall. Well, maybe like 20 feet away from City Hall or something, I don't remember exactly, but -- people climbed up the flagpoles and took down the American flag, and they put up, let's see... Like, a Puerto Rican flag, a red, black, and green flag, and a black flag, and the fourth one... Oh man, I wrote it down recently. It's in -- it's in some of the old, like, the Spheric newspaper --

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: -- So I don't have it all from memory. I just remember seeing the black flag, and being like "Yeah, that's my people!" Or whatever, you know. (laughs) And I remember -- (inaudible) the Pan-African flag and the Puerto Rican flag. But -- what was the other one? Anyway, that was just like, incredibly powerful. I just felt like we could do anything, and then once -- I do not remember the moment, if there was a moment people on the ground decided to start marching, or if there was something said from the stage, I don't remember hearing the speeches, I think it was just like, you know I was more on the north side of the park, and the speakers were on the south side of the park. I really don't remember anything of the speeches. But I remember when -- the next thing I remember, is basically, we were all on the street trying to break through the police line, but there were just so many police, so we just kind of walked -- we marched in the street, around City Hall Park. Just pretty much, like, packed together, very energetic, fast-walking, and I saw people pushing over police barricades, like the wooden kind. They didn't have the metal ones so much back then, but they did have some metal ones that day, but it wasn't, like, the amount they have now. And so, it was some metal one-- I mean, sorry, some wooden ones, and -- and then I did it. I was, like (laughs), I don't know, I was talking to someone, and I lifted up the top of the wooden barricade, so it became apart, and I threw it down. And the -- that was -- there was, like, my life before that moment, and my life after that moment (laughs) --

Amaka: Wow.

Suzy: It just felt like -- you know, there was one thing to say, like, we could run this world better, and then there was an-- it just felt, like, we really could. We really could take like, take this system apart, build something better. We can do it. It's just a matter of confronting your fear. [00:35:00] That's what it felt like. And it was like euphoria -- anyway, then, what happened? We marched around back to the south side, and I was with Chris, and he was with -- I don't know if it was -- it might've been Lenina?

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: I think it might have been Lenina. But it was like the first time I met her -- or it was someone else from Hunter. But, a woman. And he was trying to stick with her, and he was kind of trying to stick with me too. I just kind of -- anyway, so he was like "Let's go," and I think what happened was, we saw, there was like, some kind of confrontation with the police happening on the southwest corner. We went down there, we're pushing -- I don't remember exact -- ah, okay, the next thing I remember is that I saw some people get beat up. I saw these young guys getting hit with -- by the police with sticks, and it was really -- you know, it got very real. Got really real. (laughs) And I was yelling -- you know, just yelling at the cops, and then the next thing I remember was getting pepper sprayed --

Amaka: Wow.

Suzy: -- and, that sucked. (laughs) And then -- then, that's the last thing I remember from City Hall Park, we just kind of marched to BMCC and then we went to the One Police Plaza. And, like, waited for people to get out.

Amaka: So, after that rally, what do you -- so, what do you remember coming after that in regards to, you know -- I guess, one, the CUNY Coalition, in regards to, like how -- you know, the meetings, and were there more people at the meetings? Was there like a difference between post, you know -- pre-rally and post-rally in regards to those meetings? And, you know -- also I know that, I guess, what, afterwards, like, Al Sharpton was trying to, you know, take -- you know, use that momentum and do another rally with a permit, and I mean -- so can you just talk to kind of, like, you know, what the aftermath of the rally, and how people were feeling about things, and -- yeah.

Suzy: Yeah. I think that we were bigger -- I think things reached their climax like right before that protest. And it wasn't like it really dropped off suddenly, but it probably -- they didn't get bigger, at any rate. And then, towards the end of the semester, they got smaller. Oh -- I forgot to say (laughs), I'm very proud of this -- but I kind of un-arrested this guy... Right before I got pepper sprayed, I un-arrested this guy, but he ended up getting arrested. And I felt pretty bad about it, but I found out years later who he was, and that it was like, he was okay and everything.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: Anyway (laughs), I was just very proud of that, I don't know why I have to always bring it up. But it was just a lot of new -- trying new things, you know. I always thought that, like, later, some day, I would be able to practice these skills more, but I never got to, really. But anyway, yeah. So, after that, there were a lot of arguments and things because, you know, people did get beaten up, and arrested, and a lot of the people who got beat up and arrested were not experienced activists, it was maybe their first protest ever. And, you know, people had been saying that we were putting people at risk by not negotiating with the police, and putting out the call to shut the city down. And, you know, there was a question -- in my mind, I mean -- you know, it's interesting, at that time, things weren't discussed in the same way as... I mean, it was kind of like, a lot of what was happening in those rooms was, like, more influenced by, like, the '60s New Left than the way things are talked about now.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: I mean, it wasn't talked about in terms of privilege. But, in my mind I was thinking, you know, here we are, you know. I'm not even a CUNY student, and I -- I, you know, helped to push for this. And we did kind of put people at risk who were -- who were more vulnerable to the budget cuts, and also are more vulnerable to police brutality. At the same time, I did feel that we did have a mass base that wanted to be militant, and that's why so many people turned up. Because we did call to shut the city down. And I think -- I know, I still felt good about it, and I think a lot of people still felt good about it at that time. But, like, in the fall or maybe -- it must have been in the fall, [00:40:00] there were all these articles written and discussions about it, and people didn't -- I can't remember, see this is the problem, because I interviewed Rob Hollander recently, and he had some really great, insightful things to say, and now it's like I can't remember what's my memory and what's his memory. (laughs) But I do remember there were all these debates about it, and I don't think that I, or the people close to me, felt differently about it. I just felt like -- I felt regretful. I just thought that we should've -- I felt like it was our job to -- we should've made sure we could break through the police lines, or, you know. To be better organized, so that we could actually march on Wall Street and get the objective met. That was what I felt was our failure.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: But (inaudible) -- so, I don't know. We got a lot of attention from people in the city, and other social movements. And yeah, so, then there was a hunger strike at City College, and then there was an April 25th Shut the City -- that was also a Shut the City Down thing. With the bridges and tunnels, and I was part of that too. So, there was this, like, continued building of momentum, but in a different way.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: I felt like the first part of that winter and spring were about building momentum on the campuses, and then after the March 23rd protest, was more like building momentum city-wide with other, you know, the unions, the -- I mean, we know, I'm critical about how the unions acted, but, you know, building with the unions, building with like ACT UP, and other, you know, coalitions, and stuff.

Amaka: So, how would you describe, I guess -- so like, how do we get from CUNY Coalition to SLAM!? Like, what is -- what is that process, and how does SLAM! emerge, I guess in relationship to this rally, and to CUNY Coalition, and this moment?

Suzy: Yeah. Like, basically, yeah, we were a city-wide coalition, and I think people had decided that like they wanted to -- I had skipped a bunch of meetings at this point, but I was friends with the people, like the core members, so. I would hear what was going on. And basically, like, ended up with (inaudible) from meetings. But I was not as -- I don't know, I think it was like schoolwork, and my job and stuff. Anyway --

Amaka: And you're still at New School at this time, right?

Suzy: Yeah. Yeah, I left -- oh my gosh, yeah this was a whole other thing, but in the summer of '95, at a Love and Rage meeting, I remember Chris saying, like, we all need to root ourselves in CUNY, and I was like, "I don't want to leave this school that I really love! I already transferred once." And eventually I decided he was right, and I'm glad I did, I transferred to Brooklyn College to organize, because SLAM! didn't have a strong presence at Brooklyn anymore, and, you know, I was like the envoy sent Brooklyn, you know. I was like this representative, to try to build SLAM! at Brooklyn. So, I took a year off and then I started at Brooklyn, in like spring semester in '97.

Amaka: Okay, mm-hmm.

Suzy: But anyway, yeah, fall of '95, summer-fall of '95, there was the Student Power Movement, there was STAND... There were all these different formations, but people felt like we needed like a really open coalition, and we also wanted it to be more representative than the CUNY Coalition had been, like -- really representative of students organizing on their campuses. So that's why the SLAM! structure came about. And that was very controversial, but -- I thought it was great. At first, I was like, "No, one person one vote!" But I real-- you know, the way that people were talking about it, it made me remember, when I first went to a CUNY Coalition meeting and how I was struck by, like, how white it was, and that it didn't represent, you know? Didn't feel to me that -- I mean, I felt like it represented the spirit of the people in the streets, at the protests, but not the demographics, and I felt like, you know, that convinced me about the structure --

Amaka: Right.

Suzy: So, we wanted that -- yeah. So, a city-wide SLAM! that would be made up of SLAM! groups on campuses. Amaka: Do you remember where the -- you know, with it being city-wide, do you remember where there were -- I guess chapters, or I guess where these different delegates were coming from? Was it fully represented? Or, you know, what schools I guess were participating in that process?

Suzy: Yeah. Yeah, I mean as I remember [00:45:00] it, I felt like, Hunter, City College, Brooklyn College, College of Staten Island -- but I might be wrong about that, because recently I was reminded that they were totally opposed to the structure. So, I don't know. The way I remember it, College of Staten Island, Baruch, BMCC -- sometimes Lehman, York. Less represented were like Lehman and York, and Queens -- Queens was more, a little later, like maybe in '96, '97. It was like -- it was a city-wide SLAM! for a good like two or three years.

Amaka: Okay. So, when did that decline, like what was the end of the city-wide SLAM!?

Suzy: Yeah, this is something (laughs) -- something I've really asked myself. Okay... It must've been... You know, okay -- so let me think about it this way, in terms of where I was at the moment, and try to remember. So, if I started at Brooklyn spring '97, I think that was still -- there was still weekly city-wide SLAM! meetings at that time. And then -- but then when I think about the following fall of '97, I'm not sure about that. And I know -- I think I'm certain that, by the spring of '98, I don't remember being at city-wide SLAM! meetings anymore. What I remember is that I hung out with the Hunter people, and I was being mentored by them. So -- it was like a combination of being in Love and Rage with other SLAM! people, and being mentored by the Hunter people. And, oh man -- who was organizing the protests? I guess, like, SLAM! USG at Hunter was... Yeah, because by -- okay, so by the spring of '98, Open Admissions was the big issue. I think everything was just organized by -- it was at Hunter, yeah. And I would go to those meetings at Hunter. I -- it sort of collapsed into, like -- like, campaigns, that would meet, like, in Hunter USG, but, like, if you were city-wide SLAM! you would just go to those meetings, but they would be at Hunter. It had not -- like, the independent city-wide coalition was not really meeting anymore. But there were people around different campuses, like myself, and Caroly-- me and Carolyn -- Carolyn had come back to Brooklyn College at that point. She had been away for a year or two -- you know, away from college for a year or two, but she went back. Not as a student, but just to organize in the spring of '98, and... Maybe before that. Anyway -- yeah, yeah, I think we were just going to Hunter.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: For meetings.

Amaka: Okay. So, at Hunter... Well, I guess -- like, so in terms of, you know, you being at Brooklyn College organizing SLAM! I mean what was that process like? I don't typ-- I don't really hear that much about SLAM! chapters, or SLAM! activity outside of Hunter, because I guess Hunter has just had like, the most power and momentum, and, since they took over student government, but what was it like to organize at Brooklyn? And for how long did that last at Brooklyn College?

Suzy: Yeah, well, it was kind of sad because there was a really strong Brooklyn College SLAM! contingent that just kind of disappeared. In '95 -- I think they had like 2,000 people going to that march. Or maybe it was 600 -- you know what's funny, because those two different numbers stick in my head.

Amaka: (laughs)

Suzy: Six hundred and 2,000. So random. But they had -- I think it was 2,000. They marched up Flatbush Avenue, and they went into -- they jumped the turnstiles and everything -- or the door was open, so that they could all get on the subway, because there was so many of them. There was huge involvement -- but after that... Yeah, trying to organize at Brooklyn was difficult by the time I got there as a student. And I remember talking to these two guys in the BSU -- actually, Jumaane Williams, and this guy Kirsten were the two main people in the Black Student Union at the time. And I don't remember which one of them, but one of them was saying -- you know, "We went to your protest (laughs) and we got our asses kicked by the police and arrested, and [00:50:00] we're not going back to City Hall. Like, we'll do stuff on campus, but we're not going back to City Hall." And I felt like they really

spoke for the student body at Brooklyn, like -- in a way, like, you know, people did not feel like -- I mean it was way out in Brooklyn, and a lot of people commuted really far too.

Amaka: Yeah.

Suzy: And -- It just felt like -- I think it felt like, to them, that there was this city-wide coalition that was really based in Manhattan, that was telling them to go put themselves -- put their body on the line, and, you know, at City Hall, and like, you know... Not -- it felt -- it didn't feel right to them. It didn't feel -- it didn't work out in the -- what the -- you know, they didn't feel like they wanted to continue that, so. But there was this amazing crew of students -- I -- that continued meeting as SLAM! in '96, that had been at the core of the CUNY Coalition, Brooklyn College component. And -- basically, like, it was a really cool crew of people, and that was actually why -- you know, honestly, there were like three reasons I decided to go to Brooklyn rather than Hunter. Or, you know, another college. One was that, like, it was close to where I lived, and they had a campus. And another one was like -- I did want to organize at -- at campuses that SLAM! wasn't as strong at, and I also -- I really liked the people. They just seemed more down-to-earth in a way, like -- now, SLAM! people, I cannot say they weren't down-to-earth, but they were so passionate, and so excited, and so intense all the time. And the Brooklyn College people were more laid back. And it was just this amazing crew, and --

Amaka: Who were some of those people at Brooklyn College?

Suzy: Who were they?

Amaka: Yeah, who were some of those people?

Suzy: Yeah -- this guy Will Kopp -- I'm not in touch with him, but I'm trying to get in touch with him. He was a white guy, kind of a pothead, and he was kind of a natural organizer, just really social, and like really a good networking kind of person. And -- there was this guy Mubbashir, Mubbashir was Pakistani, and he brought in this whole crew of Pakistanis. Farhad -- I can't remember everybody's name right now, but Mubbashir, Farhad, and then Byron and Simone -- I just got back in touch with Byron. Byron Addison. They were black -- they are still together, they're a couple, and they're still together. (laughs) That's so sweet --

Amaka: (laughs)

Suzy: -- well anyway -- I am talking too much about my friends' personal life -- and then yeah -- Byron and Simone were like, not ideological so much as like -- they were like really -- they had energy and passion. And then there was Theresa -- Theresa Ventura. She was a white woman. She was from Staten Island -- and I feel like almost all these people were from Staten Island, and commuted two hours each way.

Amaka: Wow.

Suzy: Theresa Ventura (laughs) -- she was more like -- she got involved with the Women's Center and Welfare Action Committee, which I got involved in. Who else...

Amaka: Wait, the Women's Center and what? The...

Suzy: Oh, the Welfare Action Committee.

Amaka: Oh, okay.

Suzy: That was actually a big part of my work at Brooklyn College. That might've been -- the two main things I did at Brooklyn were Welfare Action Committee and Open Admissions.

Amaka: Okay. So how do you remember the -- the structure of SLAM! at Hunter? Because, you know -- so SLAM! takes over student government at Hunter, but is still a very kind of mass -- you know, there's lots of people that are involved and, you know, folks that are students, folks that are not students. So, like, how would you describe the structure of SLAM! at Hunter, and like how were -- how do you remember decisions being made?

Suzy: Yeah. Hmm. Yeah. Well -- I think that, I didn't really know a lot of the time until I got closer to things. It must've been... I think it was in '99 actually. Oh man, it's all (inaudible). Okay, um... [00:55:00] Naw, naw, no, no... They -- see, this is the -- a very good question, that I've been trying to figure it out myself. And I knew that you would ask, and I was like, I really need to figure that out. (laughs) But -- it just was very dynamic and always changing. So, I think, like -- when things really first started happening, there was so much momentum and energy, people just constantly made decisions all the time. Like, people were always in the office. Once they got student government, I think that there were just people constantly in the office, and if a decision needed to be made, they would just call together all the people who were in the office, and make that decision. It was an informal -- and, it was just very dynamic. And then -- oh boy -- and then after that there would be like, campaigns. So, I remember the Open Admissions campaign, which would be like -- at its peak, it was the spring of '98. But like, for a year before, and a year after, or so, like that, there would be meetings about that, and that was kind of city-wide -- city-wide meetings, but they would be at Hunter.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: And I have no idea how student government functioned at all, and I remember people saying things like, “Dean Escott, Dean Fishman, the E-Board,” this and that. It was all like -- I had no clue what any of it meant, honestly.

Amaka: (laughs)

Suzy: I was like -- these people were like gods to me. I mean, I swear, like I had them on a pedestal, all of them. I was like -- you people are like, man, like... I mean, this is like -- (laughs) I really worshipped them in a way. (laughs) It was just like -- I don’t know, like Chris and Kai, Lenina, Sandra, Rachèl, John Kim. I just thought, like -- you know, I would trust them with my life, because they had everything -- even though I knew they didn’t have anything figured out -- everything figured out, because they disagreed with each other, but I just felt like there would always be someone that I agreed with, you know, among them, at any given moment -- and I just felt like -- yeah, I wasn’t sure how things worked, as far as student government, but I felt like when it came to the campaigns and stuff, like -- people were -- people would try to, like, you know, urge the shy people to step up and stuff. And I actually remember thinking (laughs) -- you know, as a white person, I really did try to not talk too much anyway, and it just worked out really well for me, because I didn’t want to be pushed to be a leader. But I remember certain meetings, where like, it would be like -- okay, we need to have the tactical team for this protest be people who’ve never done it before, because everyone needs to learn how to do this. And so somehow I got put on a tactical team. For a protest. (laughs) And I knew it was a stretch, I knew it wasn’t really my skill area, but I also was so excited and honored that I was suggested for this. So -- but then when things happened, we got attacked by the police, and on the spot, I remember Jed saying, like, “We need to form a new tactical committee,” and he appointed -- he was like “You, you, and you,” and they did -- and I was so glad. (laughs) I was so glad, because, people who knew what they were doing, you know. And so, it was like this tension between like -- really, like -- really it did feel very -- very democratic and open, and you could take on new things and be encouraged. I didn’t -- I loved the feeling of being in SLAM!, like I loved the feeling of like... I just loved the politics and everything, you know. I loved -- I felt like all of my politics fit really well.

Amaka: Can you talk about how -- you know, because of -- can you talk about how the, both I guess the campaigns to save Open Admissions developed, but also how generally the attack on Open Admissions was like renewed? Like, how you remember that, and how people were responding, I guess not just at Hunter, but Brooklyn, and, you know, city-wide, like how people were responding to these attacks on Open Admissions. And, you know, what you remember, I guess, about how the administration was framing it, how people at CUNY felt about it, how folks outside of CUNY felt about it, just, I guess, how it all unfolded.

Suzy: Yeah, yeah. Well, I mean, it was really -- oh man. It was very hard emotionally for all of us, because a lot of the way it was being discussed in the news, and by politicians was just -- it was just so painful, and it’s so like blaming the victim. And it just -- it was -- [01:00:00] it was just, I don’t know how -- let’s see... (laughs) I mean, I remember there was this book that came out in the early ‘90s, I think, called The Bell Curve --

Amaka: Yeah, uh-huh.

Suzy: And they -- yeah, so... They were, you know, very mainstream, but kind of discredited. But... These ideological attacks that were getting a lot of attention, but like -- so this got -- so that book basically came out and said, you know, white people are smarter. (laughs) And then there was like the politicians who were just saying, you know, we need to raise standards, and this is a glorified high school, and... We were saying, you know, if, like -- if the racists are wrong -- which, we think the racists are wrong (laughs), and -- but, the problem with education is about access. It’s not about people being genetically smarter. It’s about high school, and elementary school, and people’s neighborhoods being so fucked up, and it’s not people’s fault, you know. And it just -- it just felt so brutal, like -- it just felt like people weren’t coming out and saying what The Bell Curve was saying, but that it just felt like they were winning. That they could just hint at it, and like -- it just was -- they could hint at it and then people like -- students at Brooklyn College were not very passionate about Open Admissions. It was a more white school, more -- I don’t know, if I would say middle class. Lower middle class, working class. You know -- well -- to sort of put it in perspective -- you know, doing the welfare rights stuff, about ten percent of the student body at Brooklyn were on welfare, except they got kicked out to do workfare. So, we didn’t have -- we had poverty in our student body. But it was -- it was a more, like, white -- it might even have been half-white, or something. I don’t know. And you could find out the statistics.

Amaka: Yeah.

Suzy: And more conservative. So, it was very hard organizing around Open Admissions at Brooklyn. And so, it felt -- I don’t know, like I think people felt like, you know, students were just kind of basically buying into the thing of, like, if our students are better, my diploma will be worth more. You know, whatever-- and, you know, we would write op-eds for the school paper and stuff. But, you know, the other side would be writing, like, “This has nothing

to do with race,” and like, “You’re, you know, like, basically making it to be this, you know, issue that it’s not -- we’re just trying to have a better university.”

Amaka: Yeah. Uh huh.

Suzy: It just felt like very painful. (laughs) Like -- I mean, like, the welfare stuff felt really painful because of, like, you know, my mom having been on food stamps, and the way that my dad used to talk about my mom, like she was lazy and -- every day she’d be out looking for a job. But he said that, you know, she -- you know, he had all this money, he wasn’t going to give us any more money, because she should just be earning. And that felt the same way -- and Open Admissions felt -- losing Open Admissions felt like the same way, like, as the attacks on welfare, it just felt like, “It’s your own fault, and just shut the fuck up, because you’re complaining too much, you know.” It just felt like “You’re whining, and you’re useless, and --”

Amaka: Yeah.

Suzy: -- “if you’re just going to be a useless person, don’t do it on our dime,” you know. It just felt very painful. (laughs) Oh man. When I think about being younger, you know, like, my early 20s, everything was so emotional, you know? But things --

Amaka: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Suzy: So I think about it less in theoretical terms, and more in like, how it felt.

Amaka: Yeah. So -- do you -- what do you -- I mean, do you remember the faculty’s stance? Like, I’ve read that, you know, like the faculty, I guess, as a unit -- I don’t know if it was like the faculty congress, or I forgot whatever the term was, was against, you know, ending, you know, remediation. But of course, you also have faculty that are fully in support of it, like, you know, the faculty that were members of like, National Association of Scholars, who were like, trying to end like, you know, both remediation and ethnic studies, and -- you know, everything. So, do you remember anything about, like, faculty’s kind of, like, response, or -- you know, thoughts in regards to, you know, the mounting attack on Open Admissions?

Suzy: Oh, wow. [01:05:00] Shoot. Yeah, we had some leftist faculty at Brooklyn. I remember them more in relation to the welfare rights stuff, but... Yeah, I don’t know --

Amaka: It’s cool if you don’t. I’m just (laughs) -- I’m just fishing, but it’s cool.

Suzy: Yeah, I don’t think -- yeah, I think other people would know more about that, like city-wide, or...

Amaka: Okay. So, how do you remember SLAM!’s kind of, response in regards to the campaigns? Like, how do you remember the -- how SLAM! was framing the campaigns, and trying to save Open Admissions -- I mean, I think that one thing that I really noticed in regards to like -- you know, after talking with a bunch of people, and going through all the archival stuff, like I think SLAM! was very good at connecting issues. So, it wasn’t just about Open Admissions, it was about connecting Open Admissions to these other, you know, these other struggles, these other experiences, and so what do you remember in regards to kind of how the campaign to save Open Admissions was framed, and how it came together, like -- you know, what kind of actions were you doing? Was it more about, you know, was it like protest? Was it -- yeah, can you just kind of speak to like, the campaign? The campaign that you guys waged to save Open Admissions.

Suzy: Okay, yeah -- yeah, basically, yeah, we had a lot of protests, you know, we would have, like -- it would usually be outside of a Board of Trustees meeting, or outside of Badillo’s office. We would march from Hunter... We’d have speakers, we’d have chants, we’d have some, like, hip-hop and poetry, and cultural stuff. And we also would disrupt -- we would go inside the Board of Trustees -- Board of Trustees meetings, and disrupt by heckling and chanting, and we would get thrown out, and... Sometimes we’d get arrested, after being thrown out. And sometimes we would -- we’d be outside of meetings that we couldn’t get into, and we would like, heckle the Board of Trustees as they went in. We just tried to be as vocal and as obstruction-- like, try to obstruct their agenda as much as possible, because we knew, like, you know, the people pushing this stuff through were appointed by the Mayor and Governor, and it was not a democratic you know, body at all.

Amaka: Right.

Suzy: So, yeah, we wanted to disrupt it, basically.

Amaka: Uh -- I’m sorry -- I didn’t -- did I cut you off? (laughs)

Suzy: Well, I was about to say this thing, you know about when Eric O’Dell jumped on the table.

Amaka: Oh, okay, so it was Eric O’Dell that jumped on the table. (laughs)

Suzy: Yeah. (laughs)

Amaka: Okay. (laughs)

Suzy: I was almost going to do it, but I was about to graduate, and people said “No, you’ll just be expelled.”

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: (laughs) I don’t know if it really went off very well, but we were just gonna try and disrupt whatever way possible.

Amaka: Okay. That's useful, because I feel like I've heard multiple people reference someone jumping on the table, but they couldn't quite remember (laughs) who it was, so that's a good detail. So, after, you know, Open Admissions was lost, like I can imagine that was extremely demoralizing. Can you talk about, like, what, you know -- what that meant in regards, to like the work? Did it just kind of immediately reorient? Did -- you know, was it the same people in leadership? Did they just continue to do different projects? Or did people take a break, you know, after Open Admissions was lost? Was there new folks coming in after Open Admissions? I mean -- how do you remember kind of the respon-- like, your -- like you guys's response to just, you know -- other campaigns, or community work post-Open Admissions, and if it shaped who was doing the work at all.

Suzy: Okay. Well, I graduated right at the time when we lost the campaign. And SLAM! fell apart at [01:10:00] Brooklyn right after-- you know, when me and Carolyn graduated -- we weren't able to really re-form, re-start SLAM!. The original SLAM! people at Brooklyn had not -- had like, kind of stopped being activists. I would still -- they were my friends -- you know, they were my friends at Brooklyn. They stopped being active, so we started a new coalition, but we couldn't call it SLAM!, because the ISO was saying that SLAM! wasn't a coalition, and SLAM! was fucked up, and so like -- we had to have an open coalition that wasn't SLAM!. Anyway, that died out after the spring of '98, and, you know, it was very demoralizing, also because, you know, when we left -- when I graduated, I knew that it -- there was -- I left nothing behind me (laughs). Nothing that lasted, so. I hadn't, you know, I didn't even hear of any activism at Brooklyn after I graduated. So basically, I just worked with Hunter folks.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: But -- after that. But yeah, I think, like -- so, basically, we decided to do -- so SLAM! basically decided to do a high school organizing program, because we knew -- you know, we had an appeal, so Open Admissions was voted down in the spring of '98, and then we had like six months to appeal it, and then it got for real voted, or whatever. So, during that time, we knew we were losing. We decided we were going to do this high school organizing program to try and organize high school students to fight for Open Admissions, because they were the ones who really needed it. And we were flyer-ing outside of high schools in the morning, at like seven in the morning. And that -- that didn't go anywhere, honestly. But I learned a lot about flyer-ing, and how you need to like, talk to people and listen to people -- I learned a lot about organizing during that year. Just, like, really good flyer-ing skills. Like, not just handing someone the flyer, but -- really engaging them, like asking them what they think, you know. And that's what I really -- one of the things I treasure the most from SLAM!, was like, learning how to do real outreach that really -- you're just really talking to people, and asking them what they think, and listening, and letting what you hear influence your organizing.

Amaka: Right.

Suzy: But -- the flyer-ing never went anywhere. And then the high school organizing program -- moved into this kind of training program that we did through schools for it -- that students would get credit from their school. And yeah, so -- then also, so basically, I think it was after that time that things just really were just Hunter.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: And I think at Hunter, they really were working on a lot of different things. I was just working on the high school organizing program. Yeah, so -- in my -- I mean, just, everything else I know about what they were doing at that time is just like from my research.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: In the archives. (laughs) And then -- and then, like, the next parts that I remember were, like, police brutality organizing, and like starting like '99, 2000, and getting involved with the Global Justice Movement in 2000.

Amaka: Okay. So after Open Admissions, it's not as if -- people that were burnt out from Hunter left, or anything, or that, you know, it needed to be rebuilt after Open Admissions, or kind of reoriented. People just kind of moved into the next thing?

Suzy: Wow. Um...

Amaka: It's a question. I don't know. (laughs)

Suzy: Well -- yeah, I think so, I mean mainly, basically like, in my -- my life kind of fell apart (laughs) in like May, June of '98 -- because Love and Rage split and -- it was like, it was devastating. And then we started this new group, Fire By Night Organizing Committee. And that was like hell, it was like a year of hell, and -- we related to SLAM! in a really fucked up way, and, my time -- it was -- my memory of it is just... It's really weird. And I was always like, "Why don't we just work with SLAM!?" Like, why do we have to have this little fucked up group?" And -- and people said, "Well, because SLAM!'s not a revolutionary organization," blah, blah, blah. Anyway, somehow during that period -- so I quit Fire By Night in the summer of '99, and then in that fall, I think that's when SLAM! started having membership meetings.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: So, I was not part of those decisions, because I was so burned out, like -- I felt physically ill whenever I thought about going to a meeting or a protest, for like a year or two. And so, there was just -- so when I started [01:15:00] coming back to SLAM! was like... Yeah, fall of '99, I think that's when they started having... You know, "We're having membership meetings," and like, I got a call or something, someone called me, and I was like, "Oh, great, yeah, I'll come." And from then on, I would go -- I think it was Wednesday night or something. And like throughout 2000, I was going to those meetings, I think. I think.

Amaka: Okay. You mentioned that -- so, you know, particularly '99, 2000's, when SLAM! began to kind of -- I wouldn't say re-focus, but the work on policing, police brutality kind of increased, as well as, you said, the global justice movement. Can you talk about the work that SLAM! was doing in relationship to the global justice movement?

Suzy: Yeah, yeah. That was really exciting. Yeah. I think -- okay, right. Well there was this group called the Direct Action Network, that kind of sprang up, and they would meet on the Lower East Side, and -- I remember feeling like... Okay. This is weird. Well, the first thing that we did, chronologically, that I remember, in relation to the global justice movement was April 16th, 2000, in DC. So it was like the IMF/World Bank meeting or something? And we met up with people from STORM, and we stayed with them, I think it was a church. It was a building that we stayed with them. We all slept on the floor, and we had networking -- we had meetings with them. And that was like -- I mean, I think that was when the Red Pill Network was formed, but I might be wrong.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: It might've been kind of formed over email, before then, or afterwards. But we basically had a bunch of meetings with the STORM folks, and some folks, I think from other towns. Not just New York and the Bay Area. But I can't remember -- oh yeah, there was this guy from LA, yeah! There was this really cool guy from LA who was working on the like -- university -- access to university that -- now, I can't remember if it was -- it was like -- yeah, it was -- I had this poster that I got from him. It was Proposition... 209?

Amaka: Yeah.

Suzy: That's the number?

Amaka: Yup, 209. So that -- the -- that's the affirmative action ballot measure? Which one?

Suzy: Okay. Totally -- yeah, yeah, he was like, he was this Chicano guy, and he -- I just remember him because I was like, cool, there's someone from LA, like it's not just Bay Area and New York. And Van Jones was there. And... I don't know, I remember when we first got there, it became -- I don't remember how, but it became clear to me that it was like -- I mean, I felt like it was a people of color space, I don't know what made me feel, if someone said something, or if I -- it was just what, the vibe I picked up or whatever. I remember turning to Chris and being like, "Is it okay that we're here?" And he said, "Don't be silly." And I feel angry about that. I'm still angry about that, because I never got a choice about whether or not I wanted to participate in that, and I don't know -- I don't think I would have if I had known, and I -- but I can't remember what told me that it was a people of color space. And then in the end, the Red Pill Network was not -- was not a people of color only organization, or network, or whatever. But there was something about that space -- I don't know, maybe there was a sign that said, "People of color networking." So -- I don't know! (laughs) But I was, like -- "Are you sure it's okay we're here?" And he said, "Don't be silly." That was end of conversation, you know. Anyway, our friendship has -- (laughs) we've had a lot of ups and downs. But anyway -- and then -- that -- just to continue that thread of things, in -- during the Republican National Convention that summer, it was just really weird to me, because there was this -- there, it was actually called the People of Color Caucus, and there were white people in it. And I remember this girl who had dated my arresting officer, who wouldn't help me -- she wouldn't testify against him, and she was telling me how great he was -- this guy who fucking arrested me and grabbed my ass, at Hunter during the Open Admissions struggle, who -- she was not even in SLAM! -- this white girl. Anyway, she was representing the People of Color Caucus in fucking -- what is it called? Oh man. I'm so mad [01:20:00] when I think about it! (laughs) It was... a Spokes Council. And she was like -- I remember -- I just remember seeing this, because I was not, I was like "I'm not going to be part of the People of Color Caucus." But I remember coming outside and I was like, "I can't roll with my crew here." I'm not with SLAM! here, because, I -- on principle, I am not going to be part of this caucus. And then, seeing her -- I was like, "Ugh!" Anyway, whatever.

Amaka: (laughs)

Suzy: That was... But it's meaningful, because it's all about -- whatever. Anyway, blah blah blah.

Amaka: Okay, so... Can you -- can you talk about SLAM! socially? So, a lot of people that I've talked to -- I mean, of course, you know, you guys were engaged in like really important work. But you know, it seemed like folks were having fun. Like you mentioned, you know, pretty much, a lot of events, there was music, there was poetry, and folks, you know, socially hung out together and everyone was talking about -- (laughs) people I've been talking to

have said, “You know, we were fly. Like, we were fly, like we had our chants, and we looked good, and like, we were having fun, and we were fly.” And so, can you kind of speak to SLAM! socially in that kind of way?

Suzy: Yeah! Yeah, I mean, like... I think that’s a big part of why it lasted so long, and brought in a lot of new people over the years. It was just, like, so many aspects of culture were incorporated. I mean, right in ‘95 was kind of the height in New York of, like, the spoken word poetry scene, poetry slams and all this, Nuyorican Poets’ Cafe. Suheir Hammad was really big in that, and then, like, Rachel knew a lot of hip-hop artists, you know, and break dancers and stuff. And -- like, I remember this crew, Rockafella, she was this woman who like was -- breakdancing crew. I remember her performing at a SLAM! protest and -- and saying that she got her name because, they told her she couldn’t breakdance at Rockefeller Center, unless her name was Rockefeller. (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs)

Suzy: I just felt like that really embodies a lot about SLAM! and, like, the city and... Like, this -- I read that book, the -- you recommended *The Assassination of New York*, about the Rockefellers. Anyway -- it just like was this culture of defiance against all of that, like -- *The Assassination of New York*, you know. Like, it was just -- like, so many aspects of that culture were incorporated. And then, like, the multinational -- the cultures of all the immigrants from all over the world who were part of SLAM!. And -- we sometimes even, like -- so it was like, our protests were really, even more interesting, you know, than other protests. And like -- you know, I especially remember in the like winter, spring of 2000, where well, I guess it was really like the winter at the beginning of 2000, when all of the protests against police brutality were happening. And some of the high school students in the high school organizing program were making up these chants from like the hip-hop, you know, that was happening at the time, and it was just so vibrant and exciting. And yeah, so -- it was just not, like, your same old protest. So, it was almost, like, you know -- any protest, really, I would rather not go, you know.

Amaka: (laughs)

Suzy: I’d rather go to a party than a protest, right? Like, going to a SLAM! protest was like going to a party. And you got to be doing something that meant something. So...

Amaka: You know, SLAM! being such a multi-racial, multi-national space -- how, I mean... I guess I’m wondering like how -- you know, I’ve heard that -- and it’s still like an interesting thing, but it’s like I’ve heard -- I guess both in terms of kind of, you know, racial -- racially, ethnically, but also just politically, with such, you know, various different kind of political orientations and lines within the space... I think in some other organizations, it would’ve just imploded. Like, what -- (laughs) how did SLAM! like maintain itself, all those years with such varying different political lines and ideologies and -- you know, because it’s just really fascinating to me. Like, someone described it -- I was interviewing someone and they were saying that, you know, you’d come to the space and it’d be like, you know, like the black nationalists in that corner, and then it’d be like, [01:25:00] you know, the queer kids in this corner, and it would be like the communists over here, and like, you know, sometimes -- sometimes, folks would argue, but, you know, if they were all working on a campaign it got done. So, I just see that really fascinating. So like wh-- you know, how -- how did that happen? (laughs) Like, how -- how do you remember all of that, I guess, happening in -- yeah.

Suzy: It was really like that! Yeah. And -- I do think that part of it was because we -- the older members, like, Kai and Chris I remember in particular, encouraging people to just have really lengthy, dynamic conversations, and not -- like, Chris encouraged me to move in with Jed when Jed needed a roommate for the summer. I subletted for Jessica the summer of ‘95, and he was like -- I think, he was almost like rubbing his hands together, because here I was, like very militant anarchist queer, you know. Feminist. Like, I hung out with, basically lesbian separatists, you know. When I found out that I’m or -- when I became bi -- when I came out as bisexual, they unfriended me. You know what I’m saying. That was my friendship group. And then me being roommates with Jed, who at that time was -- I would say fairly homophobic, and we would yell at each other. But he would always couch it in terms of political this and that. And, I don’t know, anyway. I loved him like a brother. (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs)

Suzy: Anyway. We would just yell and yell, because, I think that, like -- knowing we were encouraged -- knowing that, like, our friend had like kind of encouraged us to move in together, knowing that we were going to fight the whole time, but expecting that we would both grow from it. Like, he felt like Jed could work on his gender politics and his queer politics, and I could work on my, like... My race and class politics. It was like, you know. It was -- or my, my understanding of Marxist, kind of -- like, Marxist approaches to things, you know?

Amaka: Mm-hmm.

Suzy: So, I learned a lot from Jed. And I think that’s like a good example, and also Kai, like Kai had tremendous amounts of energy for conversation. It was just like -- she set the tone a lot. Even before her, it was like this, though, so I don’t know. She didn’t -- she got a job with SLAM! through Chris. So, I don’t know, but anyway, she always, like. She just always had time to argue or discuss things, and she would get very passionate, we all would,

but she would never say “Oh, maybe we should just agree to disagree, and not talk about it.” (laughs) That was never what we chose to do. And so, I think that the fact that we would give so much time and energy, and not say “Oh, we’re wasting time arguing.” I think that actually was the strength of it.

Amaka: How did -- so, I guess in that kind of environment, I mean how was conflict resolved? Did y’all just argue through it until you got tired? (laughs) Or were -- like, how was conflict resolved?

Suzy: Let’s see... I’m just thinking. Yeah, I think -- I think we’d argue until we got tired, yeah. Or, basically, we would -- we would try to get as many people in the room as possible, and people would sort of respect which way it was going, like if the majority thought one way or another, you know, you would just kind of -- like, oh, here’s a good example. John Kim. John Kim would sort of raise things about working with politicians, or, I don’t know, this and that, stuff that was -- it was kind of outside of SLAM! politics. But John Kim was a founding member, and a very important member of SLAM!. So, he would kind of just raise this stuff, right? And then, everyone would be like, “Hell, no.” Right? So, he would respect the majority. And I think that’s how it worked. We would argue and argue, but it would be sort of a majority -- just kind of a sense of -- I mean, we didn’t always vote, but we would either vote or -- and after a while, things did -- did have a consensus model. I think it was starting in ‘99 or 2000. We just started using consensus.

Amaka: Okay. Can you describe -- were you, so you were at the Republican National Convention action, right?

Suzy: Mm-hmm.

Amaka: Can you talk about that experience? I mean, I’ve heard such mixed (laughs) -- mixed things about that.

Suzy: (laughs)

Amaka: Can you speak to like your experience there, and I guess the aftermath, and how that may or may not have -- I mean, I don’t... I don’t want to say turning point, because I don’t know if [01:30:00] that’s necessarily the case, but like, can you just talk about that, and the aftermath, and how that kind of affected people?

Suzy: Yeah, yeah. Well -- I went to all the meetings -- well, not all of them, but almost all of the meetings leading up to it. We -- well. SLAM! hosted the city-wide meetings because -- I think Kai was in a big role, like -- the Direct Action Network was acting like they were the first people who ever did anything. And it felt weird, because, like, they were mostly like -- they were actually -- there was someone who was a Rockefeller in that group (laughs) actually. I mean, he had great politics, but he wasn’t -- but it was a very privileged group of people, and, you know, a lot of them not from New York, mostly white people, and so, you know, this question was raised that, you know, SLAM! had been doing militant direct action in New York for years, and -- around issues that affect the communities in New York, and around -- you know -- people went to see the Zapatistas and everything, like, and did support good international politics too, and it was kind of -- and we were very influenced by the Zapatistas, talking about neoliberalism, and all that. So, like, the Direct Action Network was not the first people doing those two things, you know -- street action and, you know, fighting global capitalism. You know, we saw ourselves fighting the cuts to CUNY and the restriction of access -- all the attacks on CUNY we saw ourselves fighting neoliberalism where we were at, which was what the Zapatistas told, you know -- the Zapatistas say that the way to fight neoliberalism is to fight it at home, in your community. So that’s what we were doing, and we felt like it was great to also organize against the big summits, but it was like... We just felt like, there was like a total ignorance of what had been done before. Looking back, you know, when I talked about it with people, they say, you know, groups do this all the time, they’re like, “We were here first,” and they get territorial. And like, oh, maybe there was some of that, but we saw it as kind of an anti-racist argument that we were bringing up. Anyway, so we started hosting the meetings, and we ended up pushing it for being around police and prisons, to really root it in the issues of Philly, because it was going to be in Philly, and that’s where Mumia was, you know, prosecuted, and the MOVE bombing and all this. So, we felt like, this was a chance for the global justice movement to fight, you know, the war at home, basically. Like -- and connect the issues -- the global issues, to the war on communities here, and police brutality, and mass imprisonment. And that was really exciting, and there was a lot of radicalism -- I mean, for me, as a white person, you know, socially, it was really exciting, because I met all these new, young white radicals. And, you know, for me, actually, like SLAM! wasn’t very -- socially, it was not -- what am I trying to say? I didn’t feel like I was really -- I know everyone says this, that they don’t feel like they were really part of the core of SLAM!. But I also felt like I wasn’t -- it was a long time before I felt like I was, like, hanging out with people socially. And I was -- I didn’t have -- I didn’t really have satisfying, like, friendships and stuff, because -- I was just hanging out, basically, with Carolyn and Chris and I wasn’t socially hanging out with other people from SLAM!. And so, meeting these young white radicals -- they were just a couple years younger than me, and it was so exciting. I was like, “Wow, great,” like -- you know, new friends. (laughs) And they weren’t all white, it was like -- Sarinya, I don’t know if you know Sarinya, the firefighter. She became a good friend of mine, I met her during that time. Anyway, so it was really exciting, and I noticed -- I saw all of those people really get radicalized by SLAM!. And by the experiences in Philly. But it was sort of like SLAM! armed DAN -- you know, DAN, the Direct Action

Network. Kind of armed DAN with this, like, antiracist politics, like, that was very -- it was way more radical -- it was like, combining the radical anti-capitalist, global justice movement, and also with, you know, anti-police brutality and anti-mass imprisonment, and just like, a critique of the state at home. It was just like, really much deeper radicalism. So those ideas, like -- people brought those ideas to Philly, and then when everyone got brutalized by the police and locked up for two weeks, it just was like -- it was so radicalizing. [01:35:00] Like -- you know, like Jordan Flaherty, a bunch of people who have gone on to do a ton of really great radical work, were totally radicalized during that time. And, yeah. I felt like that was an amazing experience, mostly for -- I think for the white people, like (laughs), they got a whole lot more out of it than... SLAM! -- because SLAM! I felt like, gave and gave and gave, and then like came back to New York, and was like, "Oh my God, like, we have to start a new semester, like, we're completely behind on everything. Our people have been in jail for three weeks. And, shit." But then again, people who were in Philly, felt abandoned by people in New York, because they had to deal with huge bail costs and everything. So, it was -- the repression was really, really intense. But I also feel like, the being in jail was such a transformative -- it was like really seeing what we were talking about, really up close. And Sandra Barros actually talked about it -- I remember her crying in a meeting, talking about it. She was like, "I need to have some time to tell you all what I experienced, what I saw, and how it changed me." She spoke about it in this meeting, and it was so powerful. Just the way that she felt like, getting to know the other women in the jail, and seeing, you know -- you know, there were women -- they met women in the jail who were, you know, pre-conviction -- you know, they didn't have the money for bail, like, a small amount of money for bail. And so, they were still in jail for months, you know. And... I just realized that I've been talking your ear off for a really long time --

Amaka: No! No, it's cool. I mean, I -- these, you know -- if you have to go, let me know, because -- you know, because I'm sure, you know. (laughs) We can go on forever. If you have to go, let me know, but I'm fine. I'm completely fine.

Suzy: Oh, okay! Okay cool, yeah. Yeah, it's funny, because I'm trying to just talk from my own memory, and -- but it just reminds me how little I know. Like, there's so much -- so many more things I want to know, and. And there's a lot of things I don't remember, but. Yeah, I think that that, you know, the RNC is really -- was very important. I'm really glad we worked on it. I think it was very daring. We thought there would be more people -- it was only like 400 people -- whereas in Seattle, they had like 4,000. So, I think that we just got squashed like a bug, by the Philly police and the media. It was more like a learning experience for the people who went through it, as far as like becoming really radicalized and the alliances that were made. But it was -- I don't think it had a good impact on Philly, the left in Philly at all. The left in Philly just became kind of frozen with fear after that, and like a lot of in-fighting. But I think for New York, it really brought in and radicalized a lot -- like a whole new generation of activists.

Amaka: At Hunter, SLAM! lasted for a very long time. What -- I mean -- would you say that the leadership stayed pretty consistent over that time period? Would you say that, you know, there's kind of different generations in regards to like who came in, you know, at particular times, and what was like -- I mean, was it -- did that produce conflict within itself? In regards to, like, newer people coming in, and -- who may not have shared kind of the same experiences, who may have not, you know, been there for CUNY Coalition, or been there for, you know, even the Diallo, you know, the huge Diallo march and rally... I mean, so -- I mean. I guess I'm just wondering, like, how -- particularly later on, you know, how SLAM! functioned in regards, to, like, you know, you have different kind of people coming in at different times, you have people that have stronger relationships than some of the newer folks coming in. I'm just wondering what those dynamics were like.

Suzy: Yeah. Well, I think the old heads really wanted the new people to step up and become leaders. It was almost like -- people had so much on their plate, and people had sacrificed a lot. Like, there were a fair amount of people who had slowed down their educational [track?] so they could stay longer, and put in many, many long hours doing kind of drudgery work in the student government. And I think that, like, the people who had been leaders in the beginning were really happy to see new people step up, and were constantly encouraging [01:40:00] new people to step up. And I do think there were different generations. Lenina says there were like four different generations of SLAM! and that seems real to me too.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: It was, like, the founders, and there was like, people who came in through Open Admissions struggle, then there were people who came in during the police brutality stuff in 2000, and then there was another generation, after I had not been involved, right -- anymore, really. And even stuff around the war, and -- immigration, women's rights, and stuff, and repression.

Amaka: Can you talk about how 9/11 shaped -- it ushered in a new era (laughs) in regards to New York, in regards to policing, in regards to peo-- you know, the political, you know, conditions. And I'm wondering how 9/11 affected or impacted SLAM! as an organization.

Suzy: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, basically I think it kind of destroyed SLAM! B, because we were going to start this -- oh man, it would've been pretty cool, I don't think -- I think it was kind of doomed anyway, but. Ooh, for those of us who were not on campus anymore... But, in the beginning of fall 2001, we had a retreat that summer, where we split up into groups, the on-campus crew, and SLAM! B. And I remember we were going around, we were talking about what we wanted to do... I think it just came down, to, like, we no longer had a campus that we were all at, physically, and so we all wanted to go back to whatever communities we felt most at home in. So, it was like -- it was, like, all over the city. People were like, I want to work in this community, in this neighborhood. I remember saying I wanted to work with queer youth city-wide. And everyone had, like, their own -- so it was probably doomed anyway, but I remember 9/11 happened, Peter Chung and Kai had gone to the Global Conference Against Racism in South Africa --

Amaka: Yeah, uh-huh.

Suzy: And they came back really energized. And really -- there was this meeting, so we met in Washington Square Park for SLAM! B, because -- we were really trying to start a new revolutionary organization. We were -- we wanted to have, like, a cadre organization, basically. So, there were security reasons for meeting at the park, but also we had -- you know, we weren't really at Hunter anymore. And I just remember, we all -- I felt pretty bad about this, because I didn't know -- I mean, I was way more vocal in this meeting than I had ever been before, and I kind of got in an argument with Kai about 9/11, because she had just gotten back from the conference, and she was, like, "I can't understand why everybody is like, 'Get Osama Bin Laden,' it's so fucked up," and I was like "They just crushed a building on us!" And like -- it's like, you've got to think about New York here, and what's happening to New Yorkers, and like, trying to -- and then I was like, I was getting very heavily involved that week in like city-wide anti-war mobilizing. We had a protest the first Fri-- like, three days after 9/11. And I got involved with that right away, and Kai was like, "You know, just because this happened, doesn't mean I have to stop -- drop everything I'm doing, and like, I'm working on this anti-prison stuff, and it's really important. And we just started Critical Resistance." Basically -- they were starting Critical Resistance, and I was like, oh, she's right, you know? Because I was trying to get everyone -- I was like, everyone should work on this! Like, we should all work on this anti-war stuff. And anyway, like, it just felt like most of the people there were not talking -- like, everyone was really quiet, and I was arguing with Kai, and then we had another meeting, and I remember saying I couldn't be part of the group. And I felt really bad, because the -- I just feel like when you do that, you kind of mess with the morale, and maybe I just shouldn't have gone to that meeting. I know it's not my fault, but I think that it never met again. It wasn't about me, but I look back, and I'm like, oh, maybe it's because I argued with Kai. But, you know, we were always arguing with each other. (laughs)

Amaka: (laughs) Yeah.

Suzy: Not only Kai, but like, SLAM! people.

Amaka: Right.

Suzy: I think that was, like one of very few arguments I ever had with Kai, you know, but -- it was just, like, SLAM! people are used to arguing. But I think, just SLAM! B -- I think that 9/11, if 9/11 hadn't happened, I think we would've had a chance to re-group [01:45:00] as SLAM! B, and kind of talk in a more chill way about what we want to work on. But it was like -- the atmosphere was so heightened, it was like -- "Let's all do this now! (inaudible)." Like -- ah! You know? It's just really not a good environment to try to start something new that would be, like, well thought-out.

Amaka: Okay. So, you -- so you left in 2001.

Suzy: Yeah, basically. I had just started this job at POZ Magazine, and I think it was partly about that. I just couldn't do anything else. I didn't have -- but I was involved -- oh boy... Jeez. No, 2001 was when I started full-time at POZ. That job kicked my ass. Yeah, that was it, you know -- basically I could not be involved. I didn't do -- I barely had a social life -- for three -- I was at POZ full time from 2001 to 2004. And I didn't -- I didn't do any activism, and I barely had a social life. I just went home, and, like, stared at the wall, you know? But I remember in 2003, I went to an anti-war protest with SLAM! people, and it was a great protest. We had the police surrounded at one point. And then we were (inaudible) -- there was this one point, like, we were -- you know, we were leading a bunch of people through traffic, like, you know, on, like -- what I guess you would maybe call like a wildcat march, or whatever. Like, in the street, against traffic. And it felt really good. So, it felt like -- it felt like, to me, it was still SLAM!, you know it was a bunch of new people I'd never met before, but they were happy to meet me, and I was really happy to meet them, and it just felt like it was still SLAM! like, to me.

Amaka: Do you remember like towards the end, like the last few years of SLAM!/? Like who was in leadership?

Suzy: Yeah -- I guess I would say -- I think Tamika, Suzan Hammad. And Joseph Phelan. There was someone named Georgina -- Georgina? Oh, my goodness. I'm the worst, see, I should actually -- well I haven't gotten that far in my research right now. I feel like, as a researcher, I'm -- I'm just speaking as me right now. (laughs) Anyway,

like -- I'm just speaking as me, because that's what -- the most useful to you. Yeah. And John McCann Doyle, I think.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: Oh, and there was somebody named Zahara.

Amaka: Zahara? Okay.

Suzy: Yeah, I'm going to check -- or Zaira, oh my goodness. She spoke at the anti-war march in DC, like the big, big national anti-war march.

Amaka: Okay. Okay. Okay so, after -- I mean, so -- how do you feel like, you know, this period in your life kind of -- you know -- like what is it -- what -- I guess I'm asking like, you know, what do you think the significance of this period was, I think more -- you know, just generally, I think, to thinking about New York, and thinking about, you know, movements. But again -- but then also, more specifically, how do you think that this period may have kind of impacted or shaped you?

Suzy: Oh, wow, okay. Yeah, I mean, I was involved in the CUNY movement for a really long time, so... It was a lot of different phases of my life, and -- okay. (sighs) New York, I just feel like, there -- I'll just start talking about it in terms of New York first, and then --

Amaka: Sure.

Suzy: New York... It was like that Giuliani time, right? And the gentrification of everything -- not just space, but like the university, and our imaginations of what was possible. And then ending up being in -- after 9/11, kind of starting in 2002 to 2003, the way the police started corralling people at protests. With those metal barricades. It just felt like we had started out with, you know, tons of young people in the street, really willing to take risks, really willing to -- to make a statement, you know, by putting their bodies on the line, against the attacks [01:50:00] on CUNY. And then it felt like -- it just feels like there's lulls, and then there's upsurges. So, there was another upsurge around police brutality, and that felt really good, because there was a lot of high school students in the street. Also in '95, there were a lot of high school students in the street. I guess that's one thing I learned, you know, just that these things do kind of ebb and flow, and good organizing makes it possible, but you can't like, will a movement into being. And it was during some of the low points that I learned most of my organizing skills, because we were kind of desperate to get anyone involved, and so we really had to hone our skills as far as outreach was concerned and stuff. But yeah, I'm a little bit all over the place -- and then, and then during the anti-war movement, there was another upsurge, and then during like, the RNC in New York in 2004. But yeah, it just felt like... I don't know. I've been fighting budget cuts my whole life, you know? I feel like everything we were doing, we were trying to save the gains of the '60s, you know? But the Panthers and the Young Lords were who looked up to, you know? We would even do their chant -- like, we would (laughs) -- we would sing their songs and stuff, in the street, you know. And, like -- (sings) "Revolution has come -- Off the pig! -- time to pick up the gun," and the police didn't like that, they would beat us up and stuff.

Amaka: (laughs)

Suzy: But we -- we were -- we saw ourselves as like modeled after them. But we were the people who could not save or protect the gains that they had made. And of course, they wanted much more than they got -- you know, they wanted a total transformation of society, overthrow of capitalism, imperialism, and they got Open Admissions, and they got, like, Black and Puerto Rican Studies, they got Hostos and Medgar Evers, and maybe those were there before -- I don't know. They won a lot of victories, and we were basically just trying to defend the victories that they had won. And couldn't. And that weighed on all of us, I think.

Amaka: Okay.

Suzy: And I think -- yeah. For me, I mean, emotionally, during that time, it was like... You know, being part of that group, it was the best group I've ever been in. It was -- it just felt very real, it felt like we believed in what we were doing very strongly, we really respected each other, and, you know -- being in -- I've never been in another group that was like that. And so, I don't know. It was very hard, that we kept -- we just basically lost everything, you know, that we fought for. But... That was hard. And then it was -- so eventually, like, I had a major burnout period. But even, you know, after that, I was able to come back and be part of it. And I feel like SLAM! brought out the best in me, you know like, Sandra Barros, I remember, in the year 2000, she asked me -- I remember her just asking me, like, "What do you -- what do you want to work on, and what do you think you're good at?" And no one had ever asked me that before. It was just such good leadership skills. And, you know, based on what I said, she said, "Why don't you work on this project?" And I was like, "Oh, hell yeah! That sounds great!" You know? And I felt like I was perking up again, like my hope was perking up again. But I also feel like we did get into, like, a more non-profit-y kind of way of doing things right around that time, you know. So I kind of felt, like, why don't I just work at this magazine? Because it's pretty much the same thing, you know. It's a AIDS community magazine -- and so I think a lot of us kind of lost touch with street activism for a little while.

Amaka: What do you mean it got more non-profit-y? Like how -- how did you see that coming, I guess, into -- yeah, coming into play at that point?

Suzy: Well -- the main thing being that we worked with high school students who were sent to us by their teachers for credit. Like -- we were trying to train them to be activists, and do consciousness raising, and so we did like, artistic -- and I was co-coordinator of the creative writing crew, and so it was like, arts and political education. But -- excuse me, it wasn't like they came to us because they wanted to, you know, fight the power. They came to us because they going to get credit, and learn something. And that felt very non-profit-y, because it was a program, it had a lot of money, had to use a lot of money in order to function, and it didn't really challenge anything. It was just like a mentoring program. I just [01:55:00] read this book that was really useful -- related to that -- it's called *Uncivil Youth*, and it's about this group in the Bay Area, Asian Pacific Islanders group in the Bay Area, and, like, the non-profitization of youth organizing. And I think -- yeah, I highly recommend it, it's kind of short. It's by Soo Ah Kwon.

Amaka: Okay. What's the name of it again?

Suzy: It's called *Uncivil Youth: Race, Activism, and Affirmative Governmentality*.

Amaka: Okay. Thanks.

Suzy: I feel like --

Amaka: Go ahead.

Suzy: Oh, it's just like, the point she's making in there is like, a lot about what SLAM! was doing. Just, like, really -- I don't know, it's like, seeing young people as at-risk, and then, like, at-risk youth that we would -- our program was, like, in -- sort of intervening with that in a way that they would build themselves up to be, like, more active citizens, or, you know, in society. Rather than fucking up their lives or, whatever. (laughs) And that being kind of like a neoliberal -- you know, it's driven by funders.

Amaka: Okay. Hmm. Okay -- can you speak to the movement work that you've done since SLAM!?

Suzy: Yeah, so -- in 2004, I left POZ, the AIDS magazine, and I came back and I worked with ACT UP Philly for like six months. And then -- I actually left because -- I left ACT UP Philly because I thought it would be like SLAM!, but it just wasn't. And I couldn't deal with, like, the power dynamics that were -- at that time, it was a very fucked up dynamic. It's gotten a lot better since then. Then I kind of just went from project to project. I tried to do various things, nothing felt good. Eventually I started -- so... I mean, oh, I worked with the Coalition to Save the Libraries in 2009, which was a city-wide coalition. Again, budget cuts, in Philly. And then right about that time, I started working on Prison Health News, which I'm still working on, which is a national publication for people in prison, around AIDS issues and also, we write about, like, hunger strikes, and organizing. And I was involved in the Occupy Philly media committee. I got a lot of video. You know, after a while I realized I just liked doing media stuff, organizing is always really hard for me, and stressful. Like, it's not really what I'm cut out for. I think I'm just kind of best at media stuff. And --

Amaka: Go ahead, I'm sorry.

Suzy: Yeah, and just really -- I'm active, like, in sort of the intellectual life of the anarchist scene, community here in Philly.

Amaka: What -- let's see... What lessons do you take most, I guess, from this period? You know, from being in SLAM! and your experiences there. Like, what do you think you've -- you -- you know, what do you think you -- I guess what you think that you still carry with you, I guess, from that period?

Suzy: Okay, great. Yeah, I think that the importance of militant street protest is something that has stayed with me. You know, I think for a while like, in the 00s, like, after the global justice movement had its heyday, a lot of people in my social circles, or my political circles like, kind of felt like street protest was done for. But -- some ways, they're not important anymore and, I just feel like, because of the experiences I had in SLAM!, I realized how effective it really was. And it never -- militant tactics never get the credit for defeating, you know, budget cuts or whatever. But I think they are actually way more effective than, you know, lobbying and stuff like that. Or, you know -- some of these very flashy campaigns. You know, just kind of media stunts that are being done, I can never really get down with that, because I feel like, we had something that was very real, that had a lot of integrity, that was not just for the media, but for -- to, to really disrupt [02:00:00] the decisions that were being made about our lives, that were going to harm us. And I think -- another thing would be intersectionality, because I feel like, you know, there's a lot of debate about it, like a lot of people in the left think that intersectionality is just an academic term. But as soon as I heard it, it made so much sense to me, because I felt like that's what SLAM! lived. We didn't try to say, "We're fighting racism only," or like, "We're, you know, feminist, and that's it!" Or -- I'm being too simplistic here, but we basically fought issues that addressed every -- all of the -isms. And we didn't see the -isms as all like, being like cookie-cutter, you know, like dummies to like -- you know, we saw them as like, you know, inter -- interacting, intersecting, you know, forces that we were up against, and we saw them for what they were. We

weren't trying to, like, be super abstract about it, you know. We were just really trying to see what was going on for human beings, and, like, be real about it. And to me, that's intersectionality. So, I've stuck with that.

Amaka: Okay. Is there anything else? I mean, those are most of -- yeah, that's pretty much my questions. Is there anything else that you feel like is important to highlight or emphasize, or any last words?

Suzy: Oh, I wrote this whole thing down -- I think -- just looking at this thing I wrote, I think I touched on everything. Yeah. Shoot. Yeah, I think I said everything. I don't feel like I was super articulate, but --

Amaka: No! It was good. It was rich, like I've -- you know, it's been -- it's been interesting talking to folks and just, you know, I guess, putting it all together in a sense, you know. Everyone's different experiences, and how they kind of connect to each other. But yeah, like it was good, it was rich. I think you were very articulate, so don't -- you know. (laughs) It was good.

Suzy: (laughs)

Amaka: Thank you so much.

Suzy: Well, I really appreciate your doing this work, it's -- I think it's so important, I can't wait to read what you write. I mean, I know you were saying that it was going to be like, the first draft. But, you know, whatever, you know, whenever you want to -- you know, if you're sharing it, I can't wait to read it.

Amaka: Yeah, absolutely.

Suzy: Or support you in whatever way. You know, share interviews, whatever.

Amaka: Absolutely, it's been like, a great, you know -- you've been a great help. You know, to me, in regards to, you know, just the SLAM! Herstory Project, or, you know, even when we went to the archives and just the email conversations, like it's been incredibly useful for me, so, you know, I appreciate your willingness to talk with me, and be open with me about all of this, and -- but yeah no, it's been good, like I'm, you know, hopefully over the next few months, I'll get, you know --

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