



A project of the Professional Staff Congress Archives Committee

Interview with Jesse Ehrensaft-Hawley

Interviewed by Amaka Okechukwu

November 14, 2019

New York, NY

[Start of recorded material at 00:00]

Amaka Okechukwu: Oh, man. Okay. So can you just...? Well, do you have questions before we begin?

Jesse Ehrensaft-Hawley: Yeah.

Amaka: Okay.

Jesse: Yeah, I would love to just, like, know, like, kinda how you came across --

Amaka: Okay.

Jesse: -- this, and...

Amaka: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE]

Amaka: Okay. So could you just state your name? You don't have to speak into it. Okay, go.

Jesse: Okay. Jesse Ehrensaft-Hawley.

Amaka: And can you state your age? It's just an identification question.

Jesse: Yeah, 37.

Amaka: Your race? How you -- yeah, how you identify your race?

Jesse: White.

Amaka: How you identify your sexual orientation?

Jesse: Queer.

Amaka: Marital status?

Jesse: Single.

Amaka: And you have children?

Jesse: Nope.

Amaka: Okay. So just describe to me (inaudible). Can you speak more to, like, you know, your childhood growing up? Can you just describe the community that you grew up in?

Jesse: Yeah. So it's funny: we were just talking about the, the movements of the '60s and the '70s. I was definitely a child of, of a community that were very active in the movements of the '60s and '70s. So the -- my parents' community was all a community of transplants, mostly from New York, but also --

Amaka: Oh, okay.

Jesse: -- from other -- like, from Chica-- my mom's from Chicago -- but other -- like, mostly from the Midwe-- like, Chicago or the East Coast, and they were all -- they all moved to Oakland and Berkeley in the '60s and '70s to be part of the revolution that didn't happen. But, you know, they had some reasons to think it might at the time. They were all... (laughs)

Amaka: Everybody thought it was gonna happen.

Jesse: Right, exactly. So my dad was really active in anti-Vietnam War work, and my mom was really active in sort of second wave Marxist feminism, and my dad also was a red diaper baby, so his parents were from New York City and were, like, labor and tenant organizers in New York City. So that was sort of, like... And a lot of my parent-- and they're all... So the community I grew up in were mostly children of liberals who became radicalized, or children of, like, communists or socialists who --

Amaka: Right.

Jesse: -- then became [a product of the movement?].

Amaka: Thank you.

___: You're welcome. This is probably (inaudible).

Jesse: You know, and my -- in terms of who my parents' friends were, they were almost all, like, white, Jewish, middle class, upper middle class leftists, but a lot of whom who kind of made some -- had sort of been one or two generations in class upward mobility. So we, like -- a lot of red diaper baby kids, for example, had, like -- had working-class parents, or... So it was a very particular, interesting little community that I grew up in, in the Bay Area. And then, you know, in terms of, then, who my community was growing up, it was kind of a mix of a lot of different... 'Cause I went to, like, three very different schools. I went to, like, an alternative, progressive but kind of bougie private school. I went to a public school, [regular?] public school, and I went to a conservative, private prep school, like, college prep school.

Amaka: Oh, which school did you go to?

Jesse: PPS.

Amaka: I was [Edwards?]. (laughs)

Jesse: Oh, yeah. Same shit.

Amaka: Yeah. Uh-huh.

Jesse: I hated that place.

Amaka: Yep.

Jesse: And I... So I kinda had, like, like, also, like, friends in different kind of places. It's, like, cross-class, cross-race. Some parts of my world were, like, very, very much sort of reflective of my own community --

Amaka: Right.

Jesse: -- and some parts of my -- like, that I grew up in, like, kind of East Bay, kind of, like, middle, upper middle class. Some were, like, more privileged. Some were from more, like, working class parts of Oakland.

Amaka: Feel free to dig in. I don't want (inaudible).

Jesse: Yeah, thank you. But in high school, because of the conservatism and elitism of my high school, actually, and my background, the clash of it, I became very politicized, not because I was involved in any movement but because I was just pissed off about how obscenely, like, racist and classist, and explicitly... So it's like any kind of, like -- any kind of my own sort of, like, East Bay, middle class, white middle class kind of, like, multicultural, like, complacency kind of got, like, stripped away by, like, looking at, like, kind of unapologetic racism and classism --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- that wasn't couched in any of that East Bay bullshit. (laughter) I was, like -- met Republicans for the first time, and...

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: So... So I got sort of very, like -- so I started, like, reading. In high school, I started reading a lot of, of writing, especially from the '60s and '70s and the left movements, and got very, very politicized. So I sort of -- because of my background, and then because of that I got politicized a little bit before my involvement in, in actual, like, movement building work. So that's a little bit about...

Amaka: Okay. What did your parents do?

Jesse: My mom is a psychologist, and my dad is, like, an academic of political economy.

Amaka: Okay.

Jesse: He used to be a, like, Marxist academic, and his politics kind of changed --

Amaka: Over time.

Jesse: -- over time.

Amaka: [00:05:00] Evolved.

Jesse: But his -- when I was a kid, he was a Marxist, like, sociologist. Then by the time I was a teenager it was a little, like, what's goin' on with him? (laughter)

Amaka: So how did you get to New York?

Jesse: So I went to college... In part 'cause I went to this prep school, and in part just 'cause of who my parents were, I looked at colleges all over the country. So I went to Oberlin College --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- in Ohio, and... You know, and I'd been -- I'd been coming to New York... Great, thank you.

Amaka: Yeah, thank you.

Jesse: I'd been coming to New York City probably once or twice a year since I was a ba-- like, a baby, to see my grandparents --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- who I was really close to, and my dad -- we were really close to that part of my family, which is also the, like, like, sort of, like, old left part of my family. And also, like, the people who were doing organizing. So I was also -- so I was very inspired by my family that was here, always, like, both emotionally close to them but also, like -- starting high school I was like, "I want to do what my grandparents do," you know? My grandmother was a really amazing organizer, like, really, like, well-respected and loved and successful tenant organizer. So when I was at Oberlin I wanted to -- I was like, I gotta get out of Ohio. Like, you know... And so I was like, do I do a semester abroad? Do I go back to the Bay for a bit? But that's [been kind of boring?], like, kind of -- or whatever. So I was -- and I really, at that point, was [itch?]. I -- at that point I was involved in student activism, but I really wanted to do, like, movement work in a -- like, in a city. Like, I, I was really frustrated with student act-- like, with liberal arts-contained student activism.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: Like, I was like, this is not really what I want to be doing.

Amaka: What were you doing as a student?

Jesse: At that time, I was mostly doing anti-prison stuff.

Amaka: Okay.

Jesse: And some of it we were doing was relating to other work happening statewide in Ohio, so there was real... It wasn't just totally is-... But then I was also in sort of, like, these, like, political communities where we just, like, debated all the time and didn't really --

Amaka: Do anything.

Jesse: -- do anything --

Amaka: Right.

Jesse: -- beyond debate and then talk shit about each other, (laughter) using the political theory we were learning --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- to talk shit about each other. So I was in, like, a coop, you know, where we, like -- it was like -- where we were always just, like, talking about, like, just theories about race and class and gender, and just, like, talking ourselves into, like, corners, basically. So I was really frustrated with that.

Amaka: Right.

Jesse: And I'd also since -- at that point I was a junior in college, and since I was probably a junior in high school I'd been wanting to be, like -- wanted to be, like, an active participant in movement --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- building. So I was like, all right, I think it's time. So New York felt like a good place to do it. I had -- knew some people here. My, my nana, who was still alive then, still here, so I was excited to be -- live in the same city as her. So I came to New York and I went to the New School for a semester, and then did an academic internship at the Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project, which is more social service, overall. At the time it was actually a little bit more -- it was more activist-oriented back then. And then I also got -- I interviewed at a few different places, so I interviewed at, like, a place that I don't think exists anymore called the Center for Immigrant Rights and some other places, but the person who ended up being my supervisor at the Anti-Violence Project was this really, like, great sort of... The organization itself wasn't but she was a very, like, multi-issue, really sort of, like, powerful sort of movement leader at the time. And she was, like, creating a coalition with the Audre Lorde Project to do, like, an LGBT anti-police brutality --

Amaka: Okay.

Jesse: -- network.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: So I was really excited. Like, I was really excited by her when I went and interviewed there, and I was like, I want to do that, so... So that's kinda how I got my start in New York, and then I went back and finished up at Oberlin, and I was... So then from there, she connected me with a social justice youth popular education center called Project Reach.

Amaka: Oh, yeah, I've heard of them.

Jesse: So then I went and interned there that summer, and then I was offered a job there for after I graduated. So, like, then I went back to Oberlin, and I came back right after I graduated Oberlin to work at Project Reach.

Amaka: Okay.

Jesse: So that's kind of the...

Amaka: What year was that?

Jesse: This was '97.

Amaka: Okay.

Jesse: So I was here in '97 in college, and then I came back, and that's when I started connecting to the anti-police brutality work, and then I came back and moved here permanently in '98.

Amaka: [00:10:00] Okay. When you moved back here permanently, can you -- would you describe the political climate in New York at the time?

Jesse: Yeah. It was before the assault on Abner Louima and Amadou Diallo, so it was before those -- but, but it was during -- so there -- the sort of, like, high-profile media attention to police violence was not as high as it would be, like, a year or two later --

Amaka: Right.

Jesse: -- but the movements were really coalescing at that time. Like, there used to be an annual Racial Justice Day march that the Coalition Against Police Brutality used to coordinate.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: And back in those days it was huge. Like... And it got smaller later, actually, like, and, like...

Amaka: I saw references to it in the archives.

Jesse: Mm-hmm.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: But it -- I mean, I remember going -- those were some of the first New York City marches that I went to on my own, and they were -- and that was in '97, and they were when I was -- like, when we had that, like, LGBT anti-police violence contingent at Racial Justice Day, for example. I remember -- I don't remember how many people they were -- I can't speak to that -- but I remember feeling like it was, like, an uncountable swell of, like, masses of people.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: It was -- also, at that time the National Congress For Puerto Rican Rights was doing all kinds of really interesting work of also organizing some of the Puerto Rican gangs, so they had a really large base --

Amaka: Okay.

Jesse: -- at that time, but it's also when, like, CAAAV and Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and the Congress and the Audre Lorde Projects first came together to form a Coalition Against Police Brutality, and at that -- which sort of at different times became very small and internal, and at other times kind of actually was a foundation for a lot of really --

Amaka: Okay, yeah.

Jesse: -- significant mass work. So at that time I feel like it was -- there was a lot of really, like, like, sustained mass mobilization, and it was the same time -- and I remember going to some of the CUNY open admissions thing -- and I wasn't a participant; I just went --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- because it was the same people, like SLAM.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: I mean, so I remember seeing people who became my friends and comrades later, like -- and seeing the open admissions...

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: So tho-- both of those two things were happening in, in mass levels, and there was, like -- I remember going to a lot of rallies at City Hall that then would, like, lead to marches other places. I wasn't part of it but that was around the same time where they, like, shut down all the tunnels and bridges to the city. I think I was there, like, right after that happened. But that feeling and the momentum of that was definitely part of --

Amaka: The moment.

Jesse: -- that moment of sort of a sort of, like, radical racial justice, social justice left, I guess. So that was... That was my experience of it. Broadly.

Amaka: Get a few bites in. (laughs)

Jesse: Yeah, yeah.

Amaka: (inaudible).

Jesse: Oh, the one -- the other thing I'll say is that there has -- the Coalition Against Police Brutality at that time did have a coalition around the police murders of four different young men of color, and who were -- one was Chinese and two were Latino and one was African American. So those were sort of, like... And the families of -- and the parents of a lot of those -- of those four boys were very involved, and... So there -- and those were sort of these, like -- they didn't get the same level of attention as Amadou Diallo or even Abner Louima, but those were -- it was sort of a similar --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- kind of way of organizing that kind of laid the groundwork for them -- what happened later. And, like, Al Sharpton wasn't involved in it at that time.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: Like, it just was-- it didn't have that level of profile, but it did have a lot of grassroots momentum around it, and it was also with the frame of, like, raising sort of a broad consciousness around these police murders of young men of color.

Amaka: Mm-hmm. Okay, so you first -- this was the same time in which you first started to become aware of SLAM.

Jesse: Yep.

Amaka: Um...

Jesse: Yeah, it was all the same period of time, like --

Amaka: Right. Okay, so then when did you start actually working with SLAM? Is it just in terms of your involvement in, in, like you said, [in Project Reach?] (inaudible) and (inaudible) work --

Jesse: Mm-hmm.

Amaka: -- or could you kinda speak to that, [beginning to work?] --

Jesse: Just -- I was aware of SLAM and participated in some SLAM events before I started actually directly working with SLAM.

Amaka: So like rallies and...

Jesse: Right. So first it was those rallies, both the police brutality and the open admissions rallies. I was much more involved -- the open admissions one I just went to as a supporter; I wasn't, like... I was just, [00:15:00] like, someone who showed up, but -- whereas the police brutality stuff I was there, like, with my own contingent of both... I had a -- I did -- I also was involved in the police brutality work through sort of three different... So I was part of the LGBT police anti-- then I was part of, through Project Reach, just, like, youth --

Amaka: Right.

Jesse: -- the sort of youth network, and we worked with Youth Force and SLAM, and then also I was involved in Jews for Racial and Economic Justice --

Amaka: Okay.

Jesse: -- and we were doing... So I was, like, all up in the anti-police brutality work --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- from a lot of different places. The -- so the SLAM piece of it was more around the youth part of it, though.

Amaka: Okay.

Jesse: So, so originally -- so, so originally, then, it was much more part of these broad coalitions. So I remember, you know, the first people I met were, like, Sandra Barros and Rachèl Laforest, and they were very active in the anti-police brutality work as -- I mean, they were act-- they were leaders in all of it. But I j-- I kind of just connected with them, and they were doing youth work around it, and we were doing -- and I was at Project Reach still at this time, so I was also. So we started talking then. Also, one of my coworkers at Project Reach was also in SLAM.

Amaka: [Camila?]?

Jesse: Camila, yeah. So... So then also, just personally, we were -- we all hung out.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: Like, we were all part of, like, the same sort of social network, group. So there was a lot of overlap. Then, I left Project Reach, and myself and a lot of the other participants in the LGBT youth program of Project Reach, as well as LGBT [youth?] from other organizations, decided to found FIERCE. And that's where the, the, the actual more solid alliance with SLAM became more --

Amaka: Solidified.

Jesse: -- kind of solidified. So our first... When we star-- first started FIERCE we had this sort of interesting thing where, like, our sort of base building center was at this LGBT homeless drop-in center. It was strictly

social services, and that's where we'd, like, have our meetings and do outreach, but then our organizing center was at SLAM.

Amaka: Oh, okay.

Jesse: So we, we also -- we founded FIERCE, officially, the day of the -- after the Amadou Diallo verdict, which speaks to, also, just the time. Like, some of it is just a coincidence of some of the other internal stuff, but it also was, like, for us to have the gumption to, like, we think we can create something new and make a whole new organization, and --

Amaka: Well, can you speak to...? I mean, I guess before you talk about --

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: -- FIERCE as connected to SLAM --

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: -- can you actually just talk about the process of deciding that you guys want to take -- start a new organization?

Jesse: Sure.

Amaka: Like, what was the need? Like, why --

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: -- those... You know?

Jesse: So it was, like -- it was one of those internal/external things. One, it was 'cause of internal conflict at Project Reach, and we were doing... We were doing both a lot of work doing sort of internal... We were doing a lot of group work with this LGBT youth program that I was running --

Amaka: Right.

Jesse: -- there, where the group became really, really closely, tightly knit and, and important to each other, and then we also were really involved in this mass movement work. Also -- all of the folks in that group at Project Reach were connected to both other youth organizing groups and other LGBT youth groups, and there was a real split. Like, there wasn't any overlap. Like, the LGBT youth groups were all service.

Amaka: Okay.

Jesse: Strictly service.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: Maybe some advocacy, but nothing organizing, or --

Amaka: Right.

Jesse: -- definitely not movement building. And then the youth organizing groups, like SLAM and Youth Force, really didn't speak to... There was a lot more open-- I feel like there was some -- there was openness from a lot of people in SLAM, but that wasn't, like, an explicit part of --

Amaka: Right.

Jesse: -- their work or their program. And we also felt like, in terms of the issue of police violence, there were some very particular ways that transphobia and homophobia and, and racist police violence intersected that we wanted... And the Audre Lorde Project was doing a lot of work, sort of raising that in g-- in the movement in general, but in terms of the youth piece of it, there wasn't... And, and, and at that time all the stuff in terms of what was happening in the West Village, in particular around the gentrification and the profiling -- but it wasn't just in the West Village; it was, like, in the Bronx, and it was --

Amaka: Everywhere, yeah.

Jesse: -- everywhere. And we were -- like, a lot of our members were being arrested just for being, like, young trans women of color, you know. Like, so we felt like there was an importance for a, a voice, one, in that movement. Like, we felt like we had an analysis to bring and stuff that would, like, strengthen the coalitions that we were a part of; and we also felt like Project Reach actually wasn't... Project Reach wasn't an organizing center. It was a political youth center, like, a -- but it wasn't organizing, so we were like, we feel like we can actually do more on our own. [00:20:00] And then we also felt like there's a whole bunch of youth through these service centers that we're connected to already that aren't being organized, and we can organize them 'cause we're already connected to these.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: So we have a base that can be organized to be... So it's not just an analysis we're bringing; we actually can, like -- we have a huge base that we can build -- like, we can try to move from just being a base of people connected through community and networks and service organizations to a base of people organized in the -- in a movement. So -- and we -- and then we were getting very politicized, and especially a lot of the youth leaders who became the co-founders of FIERCE. A lot of them were very involved in the youth -- in,

like, in the, the... So some of them through their high schools -- so some of them were also, like, in their GSAs in their high schools, but also in the youth organizing around Amadou Diallo and, like --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- planning the walkout. So there was all these ways that --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- we were all really motivated around the potential of what the organization could be, and we wanted to leave Project Reach, and we wanted to stay together just as a group of people. So it was very -- it was both really macro and really micro, all at the same time. The other piece of it was, like, that was a time where youth organizing in the foundation world was hot, so it actually felt --

Amaka: Mm, yeah.

Jesse: -- partially also 'cause youth organizing on the ground was hot, and the foundation was following --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- but partially also 'cause the foundation world is just weird like that. But the -- but we also sort of could see other people -- other groups were being founded, like DRUM was being founded --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- this organi-- this (inaudible) that did, like, youth organizing and advocacy around HIV and AIDS that doesn't exist anymore called Youth Organizers United was being founded, and that was one of our other... And that started as a ser-- from a service organization and moved more towards organizing. So there's all these ways that we saw it happening around us --

Amaka: Right.

Jesse: -- and we saw them also getting grants, and we were like, we can actually get paid to do this. So there was, like, the movement part of it, and also the, like... And there wasn't as much thinking, also -- at least that we were exposed to at that time -- about sort of... The sort of more widespread critique around the nonprofit industrial complex wasn't as developed then.

Amaka: I mean, that's more recent.

Jesse: Right.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: So I think we were just like, we can get money to do it --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- we -- so we can leave this organization, where I had a job --

Amaka: Yeah. (laughs)

Jesse: -- and I could, like -- I could get money and, you know, do this other thing, and, like --

Amaka: Right.

Jesse: -- and we can build, and so... So those -- I think those were all the fa-- the conditions that made us...

[END OF SECOND AUDIO FILE]

Jesse: Those are the main folks.

Amaka: Okay. So how would you describe, like, the, like, I guess, demographics in regards to the base in SLAM?

Jesse: Well, I feel like there was a few bases, 'cause there was the Hunter student base and then there was their high school student organizing, which Sandra Barros really led at that time. And that really happened through, like, these relationships with radical educators that the leadership at SLAM had, like high school educators.

Amaka: Right.

Jesse: And that demographic, I think they worked in some schools that were much more kind of, like, mixed-class, like, you know, LaGuardia kind of schools, and then some schools that were much more working class. It was primarily -- the high school students, it was primarily Black and Latino, but -- especially the ones that were more mixed class, but also more mixed race and ethnicity. In terms of the student, or the Hunter students, it was all over the map. It was very multiracial and multiethnic, you know, I think probably more working class in its base than not, but there was also, like -- but there was -- there was -- clearly, there was a pretty -- there was a re-- a class span, in terms of some folks who were more middle class and... But I'd say it's probably the, the base was more working class --

Amaka: Okay.

Jesse: -- than not. The leadership definitely had -- were a lot of the kids who were children of activists, and had -- much more than the base, so I feel [there about with?] definitely, I think, a... Like, almost all of the leadersh-- like, the political leadership -- not all of the -- I would say two thirds of them were children of

activists, which was really interesting. I haven't been in as many places like that where so much of the leadership... And I think that says a lot, also, in terms of, like... And some of them weren't young -- like, [Kai?] wasn't young -- but a lot of them were really young, and sort of I think... I think that's a piece of, like, kind of the level of, like, political development that a lot of them already had. Some of them also had been involved in, like, stuff with high school students, so they had -- even if they were young, they'd already had almost, like --

Amaka: Experience.

Jesse: -- a decade worth of experience under their belt. But that wasn't the case for the majority of the base, the student base they were organizing. And that also wasn't the case for the next generation of SLAM leaders that came up after.

Amaka: Yeah, mm-hmm.

Jesse: Like, the leadership of SLAM at the end were mostly not children of activists, and were mostly people who emerged from the base.

Amaka: Who were some of those people?

Jesse: Like Tamiaka Byer, [Yvonne Draios?], [Alina?] -- i don't remember her last name -- [Joseph Phelan?], Tommy Huang. There are others, but those are the ones that are --

Amaka: Okay.

Jesse: -- those are the ones that are hopping into my head. And I was less -- I was still connect-- we, like -- FIERCE and SLAM stayed connected until the end of SLAM, so we -- that was an -- that was a relationship that, like, never -- that stayed really strong, but we didn't work as --

Amaka: Closely.

Jesse: -- closely with them as we did in that first year of FIERCE, where we were, like, almost a subset of SLAM, in a way, around --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- some of the work. (laughter)

Amaka: Okay. So then -- okay. So you talked about kind of the Day of Action and all of that. What are some other projects or kind of collaborations that FIERCE and SLAM continued to have over the years?

Jesse: Um... Let's see... Well, we stayed... I mean, we s-- we definitely needed to work together around the youth organizing around police violence work, and also that work on a citywide level just started to really, like, just lose momentum really -- sadly -- really quickly.

Amaka: Okay. Why do you think so?

Jesse: Oh, man. I think some of it was that there was a lot of... I think there's some -- some of it was just, like, the level of... The level of, like, Giuliani's administration's, like, attack on the movements was scary, and we didn't have the capacity to respond to that.

[END OF THIRD AUDIO FILE]

Jesse: -- sort of anchoring that kind of mass work. But, like, a lot of the groups that were a part of Coalition Against Police Brutality didn't.

Amaka: Okay.

Jesse: And they were also nonprofit. The Congress wasn't. The Congress had its own... I know, like, the Congress has its own different -- which then became the Justice Committee -- had its own -- and I don't actually totally understand, but, like, the Audre Lorde Project and CAAAV and then groups like Jews for Racial and Economic Justice and FIERCE, like, all of us were movement groups based in nonprofits with executive directors. Like...

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: I don't think that those -- that wasn't the right infrastructure to ground that level of citywide coalition building on that kind of mass level. But then I -- yeah, so I think there was -- all of those things, I think, were a part of it, and then... You know, also, we, like -- there was a lot of, like, headway around the attention we got, but we lost everything. Like, we didn't win anything.

Amaka: Right.

Jesse: And then we kept fighting for victories... Like, we kept fighting -- like, we were fighting for smaller... Like, 'cause after... Let me back up. After -- the main focus of -- after the... In terms of the youth piece of it, after that 41 days, a lot of what we ended up doing is focusing on the Cops Out of Schools Campaign, which had been initiated by the Coalition Against Police Brutality, before the -- before, like, Amadou Diallo was murdered. Like, it had been -- because that MOU -- Giuliani signed the MOU to put the NYPD

in charge of school -- all school security in '98, so the Coalition Against Police Brutality initiated that campaign soon thereafter.

Amaka: Right.

Jesse: But it didn't really... It took a while for it to actually have, have -- be a campaign with sort of strategy and targets. And I think by the point that we started getting more strategic was also in the aftermath of all the... Like, it got put on the back burner because of the response, and we started getting strategic then -- put on the back burner because of the Diallo --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- work --

Amaka: Yeah, the... Yeah.

Jesse: -- then we really came back to it after the -- after all that 41-day -- after the 41-day mobilization, and sort of not knowing quite where else to go. I mean, at that point they were looking at trying to do a federal... And also, like, Sharpton was leading. Like, it was, like, su-- I mean, those were -- there was those -- even before the verdict, there was all, like, all the National Action Network stuff led.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: So there -- it was on such a, also, scale beyond what we were... Like, we were only one little component of it.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: And we definitely -- none of our groups had the, like, capacity to, like, lead the, like, federal --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- work around it. So the youth groups -- it was Youth Force, FIERCE, SLAM, but also, like -- it was also -- we worked with, like, educators, so we also worked with, like, the Center for Immigrant Families, CAAAV, the CAAAV youth organizing group, and Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, they had a -- they had, like, a whole educator circle that was part. So we continued the campaign, and I just -- we just didn't have it together, honestly.

Amaka: Okay.

Jesse: I mean, I think it was, like... And I think that was a combination of, like, organizational mistrust among some of the organizations, and some, like, we'd have -- we'd develop a strategy, but then it would get undone. Like, just not -- a lack of unity, both, like, political, but also, like, operational unity.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: And then a lack of follow-through, so, like, a lack of ability to really, like, hold it together, like, to, like, escalate the tactics. And that happening in a moment where there had been this huge, like, momentum that was carrying everyone, and that that, like... The media attention was gone.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: Like, there was none of that citywide momentum, none of the media attention that it was sort of easy to just sort of --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- capitalize on. So we were doing it -- it felt really quiet, actually. Like, I remember by that summer, the la-- like, that campaign really sizzled out the summer of 2000.

Amaka: Okay.

Jesse: Maybe the fall. And a lot -- we had got a meeting with Thompson, who at that time was the -- I don't even remember the title anymore, but that was still when there was a Board of Ed, and he was the President of the Board of Ed. Bill Thompson. And we -- that was... That was, like -- we could have done a lot more after, and we just didn't. We got a meeting. We raised our concerns. We asked -- made our demands. Then we talked about, like, what we should do for next steps, and I think literally we just, like, never coordinated a debrief meeting. It was sad. (laughs)

Amaka: Huh. So... So was -- so that sizzling out, as you say, was kind of just operational, I guess, dis-- I don't know if "distrust" is the right word, or... I mean, were, were diff-- [00:05:00] were the different organizations -- were there just new priorities, or...?

Jesse: I mean, that, too, but I think a lot of it was, like... Okay, so, I mean, I feel like there's so many things I can... Like, Youth Force was starting to unravel, 'cause Youth Force had been this, like, really powerful kind of force in it, and Youth Force really [at that?] started to fall apart over the next few years. Like, soon after that --

Amaka: Okay.

Jesse: -- period. So that was one piece of it. CAAAV had a lot of priorities, and, I think, honestly, were just trying to do too many things. And CAAAV -- but CAAAV was another anchor in the Coalition Against

Police Brutality, so they were provi-- Youth Force and CAAAV were both providing a huge amount of leadership in that, and then stopped, honestly. And the other groups in it I don't think had ever provided that leadership in it. Like, FIERCE hadn't, but we were part of the core of it, but we weren't providing any leadership in it. SLAM... SLAM was part of that campaign, but they were also never in the leadership [run?]. They were also part of it. Um... And SLAM at that time also, I think -- there also, like... There had -- and there literally -- I mean, through all the work we did around that 41 days work, and all of the Diallo work in particular, there had been con-- like, very explicit and unresolved conflict between some of the different players.

Amaka: Okay.

Jesse: So I think that's a piece of it, too.

Amaka: Okay.

Jesse: So... And I was -- and I experienced that from various --

Amaka: Different sides.

Jesse: -- angles. Like, there was a con-- there was some conflict between the leadership of JFREJ and the leadership of Coalition Against Police Brutality. There was conflict between SLAM and the leadership of Coalition Against Police Brutality. Like, there were just, like... So just what -- it -- so, then, we -- same people were part of that campaign, but hadn't resolved conflict around --

Amaka: Right.

Jesse: -- this work we'd done together. So I do think that some of the, like... And we're also, like, a little bit paranoid about the cities. Like, n-- I don't think there was concern that, like, amongst us there was, like, COINTELPRO. There might've been. I mean, like, amongst that core group. I think there was, in general.

Amaka: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jesse: But there was just a general protective, distrustful orientation that I think a lot of folks showed up with, which is sad.

Amaka: So that's, what, 2000. Thank you.

Jesse: Two thousand, 2001.

Amaka: Okay, so SLAM ends in, like, what, 2004? When they lose the election.

Jesse: Four, I think, right?

Amaka: Two thousand four.

Jesse: Wasn't it '04?

Amaka: Yeah, 2004. So is FIERCE still doing things? I mean, with SLAM. And what is --

Jesse: Right.

Amaka: -- what is that?

Jesse: So, so -- okay, so -- right. So that -- the next thing was the Cops Out of Schools Campaign, where we were both part of it, but then it fizzled. So after that, our work with SLAM was much more just sort of as comrades, and we did, like, some cultural events together. So we would... And we'd go to each other's stuff and support each other's stuff. So they would do a party and we would bring people, like, and just hang out, and, like, meet -- have our members meet their members. They started doing, like, a queer programming series, so we collaborated with them on that. We showed our -- the scr-- the film we made about gentrification and police harassment at the Village at one of those. And then we just provided leadership -- we provided leadership-to-leadership support, and then we also had some leadership in common. So, like, Tommy, who ended up being a -- one of the staff at SLAM was a co-founder of FIERCE --

Amaka: Oh, okay.

Jesse: -- and also a Hunter student, but kind of found his way to FIERCE -- to SLAM through FIERCE, and then because he was a Hunter student he --

Amaka: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jesse: -- ended up actually kind of transitioning from FIERCE to SLAM. Like, he still was a FIERCE member, but his primary thing became SLAM. But I'd say after that, it wasn't in concerted campaigns or projects; it was much more events and just, like, a general, like... We stayed close. There was definitely trust amongst --

Amaka: Right.

Jesse: -- our leaders. Like, we'd never had a fallout, basically.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: (laughs) Like...

Amaka: So why, why do you think SLAM ended when it did? Like, I mean, yes, they lost the election, but one could say that, you know, they could have still continued after that.

Jesse: Well, also there was a period of time where they were trying to do two SLAM. There was SLAM A and SLAM B, you know? So SLAM B, theoretically, was independent, but they had already stopped doing that by the time they lost the election. That was also the time where they were most talking to Storm, so SLAM B was a little bit more, like, cadre.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: And then I think they just got to a point where they realized it wasn't gonna fly, basically. Um... And then I think -- I really think that a lot of it was that the people -- like, by the time 2004 [00:10:00] came along, they were so far from the momentum of the mid-'90s. Literally, the people were entirely different. Totally different group of people. And the people who were part of the leadership had been part of the base, but not in the mid-'90s. Later.

Amaka: Yeah. Right.

Jesse: So I feel like it was one of those things where, like... It was kind of, like, miraculous that they made that work as long as they did. Like, that's sort of the other way I look at it, like, how did they swing that for so long? (laughs) And I think they partially did it because of the incredible momentum that they were building off of, and because of the, the, like, passion -- which is related to the momentum -- of the leadership. And not to say that the leadership later didn't have passion, 'cause they did, but it wasn't rooted in that same momentum, and I don't think they had the same kind of, like, "We're taking everything over." I think that's --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- part of it, honestly. Like, they were, like -- we were -- they were leaders who were developed by the folks who had done that, and also had never wrestled it out for themselves.

Amaka: Right, right.

Jesse: They'd inherited it, and they were maintaining it, in a way, building. Like, and they were doing -- like, till the -- they were doing some really good mobilization, like, in the last couple years, so it's not like they were complacent. They weren't. But it was just -- it was such a different set of conditions and set of leaders.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: And none of those people who were leading it had been part of any of the mass mobilizations outside -- like, they had did some really good, like, internal Hunter mobilizations, the later leaders, and I'd, I'd gone to some of them, and they were incredible, but they weren't part of, like, any of the city... None of those people -- none of those people were even really around during the police brutality organizing that I was part of in 2000. Like, they all came up in, like, 2001, 2002, you know? Except for maybe -- Sasa might've still -- there might've been a couple that were still around, but for the most part all the, like, original leadership were still, like, around to be contacted, but they weren't part of --

Amaka: Right.

Jesse: -- the organization. And then the s-- the -- they had a really effe-- and then this, this administration did really effective campaigns to turn other --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- students against them. So...

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: And more effective than they'd ever done before. So it was, I think, the organization didn't have the same force that it used to, and then the administration had a more effective campaign against them, so you put the two together, it's like...

Amaka: Yeah, (inaudible) -- yeah.

Jesse: That's my -- that was my analysis of it.

Amaka: Yeah, no, I mean, that sounds about right, just, you know, talking to different folks. I mean, people have essentially said some of those things. I think some people have, you know, said, you know, the leadership was different. Some people say that there were some original leadership around, but they were trying to get the hell out, 'cause why you still want to be in coll-- like, they wanted to get out of (laughs) college --

Jesse: Mm-hmm.

Amaka: -- and, and get on with the rest of their lives, and people --

Jesse: I think there was some burnout of some of the original leadership --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- too. For sure. Yeah.

Amaka: And then, you know, the Hunter administration was very effective, like you said, at getting them out. They had been trying to do it for years, and it just was the right time.

Jesse: Yep. They struck when -- yes.

Amaka: It was post-9/11, so you could, you know --

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: -- pol-- you know, politically, there was a lot that, you know, folks could get away with that they couldn't --

Jesse: Right.

Amaka: -- before.

Jesse: And the post-9/11 stuff was a huge part of what the police violence work hard to get that momentum around, 'cause everyone was like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah --"

Amaka: Police.

Jesse: "-- NYPD."

Amaka: Surveillance, yeah. Uh-huh.

Jesse: (inaudible).

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: So it was like, one, there was more concern for activists being, like, called terrorists --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- but, two, also, there was just more general support for police.

Amaka: Okay, so, then -- so after SLAM ends, I mean, so how long -- so what did -- so... In terms of your experience, you're still working with FIERCE. Can you just talk about your trajectory since, like, that time period?

Jesse: Mm, sure. I left there soon after SLAM ended. I was burnt out, too. (laughter)

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: So I left FIERCE in 2005.

Amaka: Okay, mm-hmm.

Jesse: And then in 2006 I just kinda, like, had a -- I left the country for a while. I was like, I need a break. And then sort of professionally, I had a lot of weaving around. Like, I just couldn't -- for, like, a couple years, I -- like, nothing I tried felt quite right, so I kept not exactly landing. Then I went back to graduate school, and I got a master's in social work. You know, so -- and during that time I definitely stayed connected and active politically, but not in a leadership kinda way; in a way that I had really -- I had been. So I stayed connected to all the same people. I didn't lose touch with anyone. I still supported and participated in a lot of what I had originally... But not -- but I was definitely much more, like, "Call me when you need me and I'll show up." (laughs) And then... [00:15:00] (pause) And then I've been really -- in the last -- since I graduated social work school, I've been really interested, sort of both professionally and politically -- in trying to figure out how to integrate my interest in the arts, and movement building, and kind of youth, youth and child development work. So that's what I've, I've... So I've been trying different things, both professionally in my paid work as well as just in my life to --

Amaka: Right.

Jesse: -- kind of -- to try to build that. I stayed connected to FIERCE as a supporter the whole time. I actually am connected to all the people who I was connected to from SLAM, pretty much, throughout, like, to this day. So definitely in terms of community I feel like I've stayed pretty solidly. Like, we've all kind of... And then now a lot of people are all over the country, but I'm still --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- we're still in touch.

Amaka: Well, can -- so can you speak to that? I think that one of the things that -- particularly in, in trying to look up folks on the West Coast -- and it's been -- it's been way more difficult (laughs) to try to find some of those folks --

Jesse: Mm-hmm.

Amaka: -- but it seems that people that were in SLAM and affiliated with SLAM, they still hang out.

Jesse: Yep.

Amaka: They'd be at each other's weddings, and --

Jesse: Yep.

Amaka: -- baby showers, and...

Jesse: It -- yeah.

Amaka: Can you speak to that? What do you think kept people together?

Jesse: You know, I think... I think some of it was the foundation that the orig-- the leadership, original leadership built. What they did together was also, in some ways, more trust building than, like, for those of us who were coming from left organizations rooted in nonprofits, where, like, it's actually usually trust-breaking. (laughter) They, like, wrestled the student government -- you know what I mean? Like, we didn't wrestle the nonprofit away from someone and make their own and be, like, "We conquered these resources." Like, we manipulated the resources, but they were, like... They were -- the whole time that they were working together, they were fighting together to maintain those resources, and they were fighting on, on a scale that made their sense of common importance -- like, not like self-importance but like the importance of what they were doing -- feel so much -- so real and so powerful. And then they were college students, you know? Like, that's, you know, who you experiment with, and who you build with, and explore yourself with, and develop yourself with. And so it was very social in a way that, like, a lot of other organizations aren't in the same way. And so it really did become... And then some -- a lot of folks there also -- because they were doing so much work were there, like, eight years. (laughs) So it was their family. I mean, you know, that was --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- their family. I'm sorry.

Amaka: You're good.

Jesse: I also wonder if there's something to, like, how much of the leadership were, like, children of leftists and, like, had this sort of common... Like, that, I think, added to the sense of family. Like, we're f-- we're, like, the next generation of --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- like... And then it just -- and then I think it was also just one of those things where there was a lot of really amazing, beautiful people, and not every... Like, there's a lot of great movements where the, like, care people have for each other and the respect people give to each other is just --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- not there in the same way, or it's undermined by some abusive person who's dividing people, like... And I think there was certainly drama and conflict, but I don't think there was, like, ev-- in my impression, there was never, like, some abusive dictator who pitted people against each other. Like, I think it was a pretty, like, good environment for people to build with each other. And then... So I think it's just -- I think it's where people came up. It's where people developed. But they didn't just come up there, like the way -- especially with a lot of youth organizing. You're there for a couple years and you go on --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- so that's important, but it's not your --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- life. This was more than youth organizing.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: This was, like, much longer-term. And then -- so I think that's one piece of it. I think the other piece of it is I think most people who were part of SLAM probably have not found anything as gratifying as SLAM was. So there's, there's been nothing to replace how awesome it was. So even if they're not in SLAM anymore, that community is still so precious, you know? And I feel like I can -- just having talked to mo-- like, being in touch with most of the people, I think people are doing interesting stuff, and stuff that they care about, but I don't --

Amaka: Not the same.

Jesse: -- I don't think anyone feels that.

Amaka: I think that I've, I've heard that from -- I mean, not articulated in that way, but I, I get that, you know what I'm saying?

Jesse: Mm-hmm.

Amaka: 'Cause I know Rachel and Jed last night, like -- you know? So... And, yeah, folks are still very close, and --

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: -- you know, Rachel's like, you know, "Sometimes I wish I could do something like that." Like, we -- [00:20:00] I think they were talking about, you know, some -- not recently, but years ago, about possibly doing something else, but I don't -- you know, I don't think it --

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: -- came together. But there's, like, there's still that desire --

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: -- 'cause nothing is quite measured, you know...

Jesse: Yeah. I think it's -- I think it's kind of like a -- I think the, like -- the... I think it really is one of those things where the relationship is so strong 'cause of that perfect storm, in a good way, of, like, all those variables, that usually you don't have them all together, where being part of something so powerful and citywide, but also so intimate; it's at a formative time when you're young, but also lasts longer than just a youth program --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- and where there's not some abusive person running it and making it miserable for everybody. Like --

Amaka: Yeah, yeah.

Jesse: -- like... (laughs)

Amaka: That is just a perfect storm.

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: Yeah. Okay. Let's see... (pause) I mean, that's pretty much all the questions. I guess I'll -- you know, the last thing I'll ask is can you just speak to what you think the significance of SLAM was, and the significance, more generally, of just that time, that time period?

Jesse: You know, I think... (pause) In -- I feel like that time period, in terms of -- and you see it, actually, in really different cross-sections of demographics, parts of the country, but for you-- like, youth, both high school as well as college and young adult, mobilization, that's really the only time in my lifetime -- I mean, I think, with the except-- I mean, I guess in terms of anti-apartheid work when I was a kid, there was -- I was that... Yes. But even what I saw there was less -- oh, I'm done, yeah -- was less youth... Like, there was youth participa-- I mean, there was a lot of college stuff --

Amaka: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jesse: -- but I didn't see that, 'cause I was, like, eight. So, for me, in terms of as a, like -- in the early '90s I didn't -- there was nothing like that that I experienced. And then soon after, like, after 9/11 there wasn't, either. And so that period of, like, '95 to 2000, when you had all those, like -- it was a very different sort of demographic than all the, like, WTO, IMF mobilizations, and the RNC mobilizations, and they were relating to each other. But SLAM was a big part of that --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- too. SLAM -- and SLAM was very explicit about being like, "We want to build a base of working class young people of color that -- to be part of these -- to be part of these national mobilizations." And that's actually a lot of what SLAM ended up doing. That actually is important. That reminds me: that's a lot of I think why SLAM was less in leadership around some of the local Police Out of Schools Campaign stuff, 'cause what they did from -- they went from the, like, citywide mobilization stuff to more of the national mobilization stuff, so they were, like, mobilizing folks to go to the RNC, and they were mobilizing stuff to do a lot of this... So instead of sort of going deeper campaign, they went bigger mobilization. So they still were connected to the campaign stuff, but that wasn't really where their -- that wasn't their priority. Like, there would be the ca-- yeah, around the police stuff, at least. So, you know, and originally, the -- all the original, like -- the height of the CUNY mobilization wasn't -- it was pre-SLAM. That was when it was the huge CUNY Coalition.

Amaka: CUNY Coalition, yeah.

Jesse: So then one of the things that was significant about SLAM is building off that energy to build something more long-term, that also, one, became multi-- an organization; two, multi-issue; and, three, also, that linked with these other groups, and it seeded all these different things. And, you know, like, probably a lot of people don't know, like, how much FIERCE has its origins in SLAM, you know? But that's -- it's really significant that it did, and we might -- like, who knows what would have happened with FIERCE were it not for SLAM. And that's true for a lot of these other groups that worked with SLAM, I think. You know, DRUM also, like, had its root -- a lot of roots -- like, Asif was part of the community, and he was one of the co-founders of DRUM. So I think being able to be -- having -- one, it's an organization that came out of this (inaudible) mobilization, and then participated in anchoring other ones and on other issues, both the police violence work as well as some of this national, like, anti-RNC -- like, the national sort of student anti-corporate, anti-govern-- you know.

Amaka: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jesse: I don't know -- I don't know what --

Amaka: All that was happening, yeah.

Jesse: All that. And then it was able to, to really build an organization that was more than a coalition or a mobilization. I think, to me, that's one of the reasons -- because none of -- because all the other CUNYs had groups, and none of them -- they're --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- SLAM was the only one that became -- wanted to go... I mean, also, that's --

Amaka: Significant.

Jesse: -- significant. Like --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- taking over [00:25:00] student government for eight years --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- (laughs) like, what?

Amaka: Yeah. I mean, it's brilliant --

Jesse: It is.

Amaka: -- and it's something, in terms of a strategy. It's like, man, like, I wonder why we don't see more examples of that --

Jesse: Mm-hmm.

Amaka: -- because that is brilliant. (laughs)

Jesse: Mm-hmm. Because they had -- you know, they didn't get paid a lot, but they got -- they had jobs --

Amaka: Resources.

Jesse: -- and they also had space. In New York City, finding space to -- I mean, that was one of the things that -- I mean, for FIERCE, that was huge. We didn't have space. So SLAM was a space for us, you know, and they were inviting of other pe-- groups into that space, and they used their resources to do the high school student organizing stuff. It's -- like, they had also so many meetings. They had, like, the National Youth Task Force meetings.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: I mean, there's, like -- they were such a hub, and space was -- and they had the resource center and student government. Like, I remember we went to -- once SOUL came and did, like, a whole two-week-long training (inaudible) student resource center, and FIERCE came and was part of... It was just like, what? (laughter) And, like -- and they weren't paying rent, you know?

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: They had free space 'cause they won student government --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- over and over. So I think that is -- that, in and of itself, is just a, a moment and a possibility to study is fascinating. Yeah, I think they're one of the few -- I think SLAM and the Justice Committee in particular are, like, two of the groups that sort of, like, were coherent organizations that sort of lived through these various swings of mid-'90s to late-'90s, like, citywide mobilizations, and that were part of making them happen. So I think that's just interesting. There's not that many other, like, organizations that have been part of different huge mobilizations, and that -- and they span that time period. Like, the mid-'90s to late-'90s, I feel like, was kind of an exciting --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- time period, and they were all --

Amaka: In the middle of it.

Jesse: -- all of it.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: So that's what I would say.

Amaka: Okay. Is there anything else that you would add or emphasize?

Jesse: Maybe the leadership stuff, and, like, I think their leadership model is really interesting to look at. You know, 'cause there definitely was explicit leadership. They weren't one of those places that were, like, "We're a collective." But they also were... But their structures also -- and their structures were somewhat identified by what they inherited from student government. But it was al-- there was also, like, a good amount of fluidity. I'm actually still really curious about, like, what their decision-making processes were. I think sometimes that they weren't always clear. But there really were meaningful multiple leaders all at the same time, and I think that's significant. They coexisted, even with drama and conflict --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- but they coexisted and led. (inaudible).

Amaka: Yeah, structure is such an interesting thing, because you have student government kind of prescribed roles --

Jesse: Right.

Amaka: -- in regards to structure, but then you have SLAM that's not just student government.

Jesse: Right.

Amaka: Talking to different people is interesting because it's not consistent --

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: -- and I think that that began with the... I don't know if it's always (laughs) clear, and depending on where people came in and left.

Jesse: Right.

Amaka: Like, some people really describe it as, like, cadre, you know --

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: -- and then some people are like, "Well, no, it's mass, and we were all there, and da-da-da..." So, I mean, it's just an interesting thing to, like --

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: -- hear different people talk about the structure.

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: Mm-hmm.

Jesse: It is. And I think that's also a place where -- and I think that also maybe relates to some of, like, the... And I don't know but it's a question I have in terms of what made it more vulnerable at the end. So I think some -- there's also -- when you have -- especially when you have sometimes lack of clear structure, there's hierarchy and deference based on other things, and I think in SLAM, a lot of it was around who were the old heads. So I think there was definitely a lot of deference around that. Kai wasn't an old head but there was deference to her 'cause she was, like, an old head movement-wise. Like, she had more history than anybody in terms of her own personal life's work. But Sandra Barros and Rachèl and John Kim and Lenina, like, they were the old heads. So I think when they left, or when they were still around but --

Amaka: Just took a step back.

Jesse: -- maybe taken -- more checked out or taken a step back, I think that -- I think that that next group of leaders had come up looking to them, so I don't know what it was like for them to not be able to look to them and have them lead. Like, they could look to them and ask them questions, but they weren't leading.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: Or even, like, Rachèl was one of the old heads who was there the longest, but I know she was, like -- her last couple years she was like...

Amaka: (inaudible).

Jesse: She was -- yeah. So I think --

Amaka: (laughs) (inaudible).

Jesse: But I think people kept looking to her --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- and not getting what they had gotten from her before. [00:30:00] 'Cause Rachèl was a powerful leader. Like, serious. But sh-- I don't think she was in practice at the end, you know what I mean? She was burnt the fuck out.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: She was so burnt out. So I think... So I think that... And so that's something I also think is interesting in terms of, like, what does that mean in terms of leadership development, what was effective and successful. 'Cause it clearly was, 'cause they did have all these --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- people from the base who were leading it, and leading it well, but then what was lost, and could there -- might there be ways in the future to lose less of that? I don't know.

Amaka: Yeah. Yeah. No, I mean, there definitely -- and I think, you know, from talking to people, it does -- the, the deference, the kind of informal, structural kind of processes are clearly there. Some students later on in, like, I don't know, 2000, 2001, 2002 started up a SLAM chapter at City College --

Jesse: That's right.

Amaka: -- and even talking to some of those folks, they were just kinda like, you know, "They expected for us to bow down to them!" Like... (laughs)

Jesse: Uh-huh.

Amaka: You know? Like, "We -- they, they basically expected us to be at all of their stuff, even if we already had our own programming."

Jesse: Right.

Amaka: "And we had to, like, kind of, you know, bow down to them."

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: What, what was that, you know? So it's just interesting --

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: -- just talking to them, 'cause they have a very different experience --

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: -- than, you know --

Jesse: Right.

Amaka: -- the old heads --

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: -- or people that had come after them --

Jesse: Right.

Amaka: -- at Hunter.

Jesse: Or even I just think, like... You know, like, I think about two people like Jed and Chris, like, two white guys with strong personalities.

Amaka: Yes.

Jesse: And I feel like the old heads were like, "You get on my nerves sometimes, and sometimes you do fucked up shit, but you respect me, I respect you, and we're gonna struggle together." I don't think that that's actually how some -- a lot of the younger heads necessarily experienced them. Like, I think that dynamic is different when you're not peers.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: Right? So -- and Chris Day was one of the last people to leave, too. So what did that me-- like, what was that like for some of the young, less experienced, like, students of color, to have, like, Chris Day, who's, like, 40 and, like, has all this political rhetoric and a really strong personality, and has the old head -- like, sort of old head thing? Like, I think there were issues there, for sure, and I think for, like, Rachel and Sandra and Lenina, they were like, "Well, you're my comrade. I want to struggle through this." But that wasn't the --

Amaka: The same relationship.

Jesse: -- true for everybody.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: So... Yeah. I think that's -- I think that's... That's -- I think that's an issue. And I think the -- at the -- and I remember at the time, like, internal accountability around that was really challenging. Like, there was definitely always people willing to struggle with each other --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- which was wonderful and beautiful, but, like, actually, like, resolving those issues --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- I don't... (laughs)

Amaka: I've heard very mixed things about that. Like, I think some people think they did it well, and I know that some people were really turned off by the ways in which folks were called out, and, like, you know, some people feel like things weren't resolved well --

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: -- and... I've -- yeah, I've, I've heard mixed things about that.

Jesse: Yeah, I also think some of what, what I saw is, like, I saw this orientation from the old heads of being like, "We're struggling together," but then when there weren't as many old heads, and, like, Chris Day was... 'Cause I think that was actually one of the real hard and painful things for everybody, including Chris. When he was one of the last old heads there, I think some of the younger folks didn't have the same connection with him, so it just became, like, a power struggle, not, not, like, we're struggling 'cause we are comrades but just a power struggle. And so I don't think that was handled well. And I think there probably were some of the younger heads who also probably were, like, not principled in how they dealt with Chris, and also, like, it wasn't really fair to them --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- to, like, have, like, inherited a way of working that was someone else's way of working, where it's like, we just struggle through things together.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: You know what I mean?

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: I feel like... I feel like that was one of the ways that, like, the transition from the old heads to the new heads just didn't --

Amaka: Didn't work well, yeah.

Jesse: -- didn't... Yeah. Yeah. 'Cause I -- and I -- 'cause I remember that time, and I remember, like, that was a hard time. People were trying to get Chris out of there. (laughs)

Amaka: I mean, that's -- these are good things to know, because it's... It's -- I feel like in talking to folks, they talk about the end in very abstracted ways (laughs) where it's not really clear, like, what was really happening. So it's, it's just interesting hearing, you know, the different --

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: -- things.

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: People haven't talked about those sorts of dealing with kinda different generations --

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: -- of SLAM, still in contact with each... Like, I haven't heard people really deal with that.

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: They kind of attribute the end of SLAM to more external factors, rather than just some of the --

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: -- internal stuff.

Jesse: And I don't know if that was necessarily part of the end of it, but I think it was --

Amaka: It was a dynamic that was present.

Jesse: -- it was a dynamic, though, [00:35:00] that was part of it. And it was -- I do -- 'cause I remember, like, Chris and Sasa and... And Sasa was interesting, too, 'cause she was an old head but not -- she was coming up as -- like, when she -- she was, like, a young person being developed, and she was the only person who actually was from the original base. So she was there towards the end, but then the other two were Chris and Rachèl, and Rachèl was burnt out and checked out by the end, I think by everyone -- her own account, (laughs) and everyone else's.

Amaka: Yeah. Yeah, I'm pretty sure she said that.

Jesse: And Chris, there was, like, a p-- there was a power struggle between the younger leaders at that time and Chris. And I think there was mistakes made on all sides, but I think it was also... Like, if I was doing a transition plan (laughs) --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- for the old heads, I wouldn't be like, "Let's leave the oldest white guy there (laughter) for the young leaders of color to deal with." Like, you know what I mean? Like... Or, if we are gonna do that, let's figure out how.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: You know? Like... But I don't think that was figured out.

Amaka: No.

Jesse: I think he just stayed --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- and other people just left --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- and it didn't go well.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: And it -- and it's also -- and it ends up being sad for him 'cause I think he had put in so much...

Amaka: Mm-hmm.

Jesse: He had committed so much to that organization, and I think he'd left in a way that was part, you know, by the end. I don't know how he talks about it at this point himself --

Amaka: I haven't interviewed him yet.

Jesse: -- but that -- I just -- and I never talked to him about it. I talked to the, the, the younger folks at the time (laughs) about it.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: 'Cause I was also still at FIERCE at the time.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: And then Tommy was a FIERCE co-founder, and was one of those younger folks in it.

Amaka: Right.

Jesse: So I was relating more to them at that time, and being like, man. (laughter)

Amaka: Yeah, I might have to email you about some of those... So I haven't heard about Tommy that much, and I don't have contact information for people.

Jesse: He's one of my good friends, so I can --

Amaka: Okay.

Jesse: -- definitely do, like, an e-intro --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- or whatever.

Amaka: I'd appreciate it.

Jesse: He's out in the Bay, too. So he, Liam, and Camila are all in Oakland, those three.

Amaka: I emailed -- let's see... I don't know if I've recently heard from Liam, but I have been in email contact with him. I em-- I interviewed Camila recently, and... Yeah, mm-hmm. I'm -- I interviewed a whole bunch of folks, and I have, like, this huge list. (laughs)

Jesse: And then there's all the ones in Florida. There's, like, all these people from Florida, in Miami, which is really random.

Amaka: There's a bunch of people in Miami, or Florida?

Jesse: Sandra Barros is in Miami. [Lulu?] is in Miami. [Saoul?] just moved to Fort Lauderdale. Joe Phelan was in Miami but now he's back here. And then Alina, who was one of the younger heads also, is in Miami.

Amaka: Wow.

Jesse: So I -- and not -- they're not there 'cause of each other.

Amaka: They're just --

Jesse: It's all random.

Amaka: -- individual... Yeah.

Jesse: But it's very random.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: Like, Miami?

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: It's not, like, a hotbed of --

Amaka: I need to talk to Sandra, too, 'cause she's one of those -- I feel like out of some of, like, the core people, I'm pretty much in contact with all of those four people, even if I haven't interviewed 'em. Like, they know (inaudible) at some time.

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: Sandra is the one person that I haven't been able to, like... I have her email. I know it's the right email. (laughs) People have told me, like, "Oh, yeah, Sandra said she's interested and she received your email," but I have yet to hear from her.

Jesse: 'Cause she's... (laughs)

Amaka: I don't know. I was like, "Are you sure?" And they're like, "Yeah, no, she told me about it." And I was like, "Okay."

Jesse: That's funny.

Amaka: Yeah, I don't know. Eventually.

Jesse: Yeah, event-- if she's interested, hopefully that'll turn into some kind of --

Amaka: Yeah, I'm just gonna --

Jesse: -- right click. (laughs)

Amaka: I'm just gonna be persistent.

Jesse: Yeah, keep trying. She's -- 'cause she's important.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: She's probably one of the most important people to talk to. I feel like her and Rachèl were like through-lines for SLAM. Like --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- even --

Amaka: And I'm friends with Rachèl, so yeah.

Jesse: Yeah, even more than some of the other core people, partially 'cause they were there for such -- for such long and critical parts of it, but also partially 'cause they did a lot of the leadership development. Like, John Kim didn't really --

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: -- do leadership development. (laughter)

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: Chris Day maybe did with people in the resource center. I don't know. Jed, I don't know.

Amaka: I feel like Jed and Chris were, like, the intellectual... Like, they were -- they were very much about, like, the, the theory --

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: -- and the intellectual development --

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: -- and then... Yeah, so, I mean, I don't think they were as much --

Jesse: Yeah.

Amaka: -- from what I understand, they weren't (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

Jesse: No, they were definitely the theory heads, which is (inaudible) dynamic of these two white guys, 'cause most of the other leadership were women of color.

Amaka: Yeah.

Jesse: So it was very... It was very interesting. But, like... And Kai was very instrumental when she was there, but it was a shorter period of -- she wasn't there for the open admissions time and she didn't stay as long, so it was much... But, like... And then Lenina came in and out. Like, Lenina was really active in the first part and then took a step back and then [00:40:00] came back in. But Sandra and Rachèl were, like, from -- they were just like... Rachèl was, like, beginning to end, almost, but Sandra left a little bit earlier, but not -- she was there through, like, all the, like, the really, like, powerful moments of SLAM, and she was, like, the -- one [that people really?] looked to, you know? I don't think she actually realizes, also, how much of a leader she wa-- you know what I mean? Like, how strong of a leader she was, so...

Amaka: Mm-hmm. Well, next time, when I email her. (laughs)

Jesse: Everyone says --

END OF AUDIO FILE