

*Cities for People, Not for Profit Oral History*

*Activism During COVID-19*

*Rahel Biru, MayDay Space*

*Tuesday, June 23, 2020*

CT: Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. Would you please state your name and affiliation?

RB: My name is Rahel Biru. I am a staff member at Mayday Space. I'm also a member of the collective and what we refer to as the board of MayDay Space. I'm also a member of the New York City Democratic Socialists of America, based in the North Brooklyn branch. I also organize with a grassroots organization called Mi Casa No Es Su Casa. I believe that those are all my affiliations and groups.

CT: Fantastic thank you so much again for taking time to speak with us today, Tuesday, June 23rd, 2020 for our initial round of this project. First, tell me about the day-to-day activities with the organizations that you just mentioned. What's that like?

RB: I've been working at Mayday Space for three years now and for the most part it deals primarily with taking care of a physical infrastructure of a community center and venue in the heart of Brooklyn, in Bushwick, NY. What usually goes on are events and classes, birthday parties, receptions, workshops, Salsa, children's theater. And all that requires someone and a team of volunteers, that someone being primarily myself, to make sure the physical space is comfortable, safe, [making sure] everything works, everything is functioning, that there is enough supplies for this and that bathroom or kitchen, white boards and that kind of stuff. There's a lot of back-end work that needs to happen to make people have a good time or learn And have a good learning environment. That's what I did for work not only at MayDaySpace but before I started working here. And during non covid-19 we had over a hundred organizations and individuals over the year book the space for those kind of activities. And I was there primarily to make sure things ran smoothly and in a comfortable way.

CT: And how long have you lived in Bushwick and what is it like to live in the neighborhood?

RB: I've lived in Bushwick all the years that I've lived in New York City. And that's going on 11 years now, which is kind of crazy to think about. I lived in Bushwick and I moved to Bushwick I think everyone likes to imagine that they have some ability to change what is going on in the city or that New York City is always changing so when you move to a place you could see it rapidly transform and I like to think I got here at just before gentrification popped off but I think that's part of what drew me here or allowed me to move here was that it was still up and coming and relatively affordable before you know things really shot off in this neighborhood and it's been kind of a shock to see how many different businesses have opened the sort of ratio and differences in the kind of people that live in the neighborhood and had moved here and it's changed very rapidly. I used to live off the Jefferson stop, and you know big nightclubs are now you know right next to warehouses. And there's a whole strip from Jefferson all the way to

DeKalb and Wyckoff and before covid-19 at least it was super bustling, high traffic area with lots of bars and restaurants An art and it's both a great resource but also not necessarily there for the people who originally lived in Bushwick and it's been personally kind of a double-edged sword living somewhere that is so vibrant and culturally relevant even to the whole country really you know you have stories and Vogue magazine talking about bushwick being the coolest being one of the coolest cities and towns or neighborhoods in the world but also realizing that it's cool because the people who have been living there for so long and the culture that they created and the atmosphere they created and that they get to experience both of those sides Is both a blessing and also not that great.

CT: Thank you for sharing that. Where did you come from originally?

RB: I was born in the DC area Or more of the northern Virginia kind of area, definitely a very diverse place but also one that is similar to New York. It had a lot of turnover as far as people coming to school and studying people working government and on a contract kind of basis I think that it's very much a worldwide on a much smaller scale and the kind of gentrification that issues and development for profit that you see in New York City is also very prevalent in Washington DC. In the suburbs there was pressure that residents felt perhaps living in Bushwick for when the L train was becoming that gentrification wave was coming through those neighborhoods I experienced the same or almost the same when I was living in DC and eventually eventually in Northern Virginia or eventually Southern Maryland where I had family that kind of got pushed out or displaced.

CT: What brought you to Bushwick?

RB: What brought me to Bushwick is a really cheap rent that I found and a somewhat non renovated apartment. It was a Craigslist ad, and I wanted to live where it seemed kind of interesting but also looking for the lowest price yeah I mean that was the main determining factor.

CT: Word. So let's take a few steps back thinking about when you first learned about covid-19, what were your thoughts about it and how have your thoughts changed since then?

RB: The first time I heard about covid I think it was March 3rd the first week of March and I guess I didn't know what to think. I tried to go back to 2012 or 2011 when the swine flu was really prevalent. I just turned 22 years old, And so I was somewhat an adult and sentient about politics and news and stuff during that time and I really wanted to I really wanted some kind of example to clean to to go like oh you see something bad like this happen before you know we'll be fine we're going to figure it out you know the government and these other organizations XYZ it was scary a lot of people died a lot of people were sick but we figured it out we got through it. as that became less and less as I was less and less assured that things like that would happen or that government and organizations would pull together productively and also knowing that my work is depends on people getting together and doing fellowship and community in person I got really anxious not just what I'm with the pandemic meant or for People's Health but also what it meant for I guess my livelihood and my lifestyle in a way and in a way my thoughts and my thinking have not really changed I've gone up and down when it comes to level of anxiety or dependents when it comes to organizations and state Afters the response has just been so all over the place that it's hard to know how to feel about yeah it's hard to know how to feel about

what's happened Beyond just so you know disappointment and frustration and anger at the lack of coordination because just less than 10 years ago we faced a similarly damaging disease and virus at least in terms of DNA and we saw the response and what it could be even if I have problems with the Obama Administration you know we had a case study of what could happen and just from the top to the bottom the response has been so so bad and so I guess my thinking has not changed my anxiety has lessened and will get into it more about the response of the community and how that's helped me feel better about Community generally but not the state actors who are there and the organizations that are tasked with yeah.

CT: Thank you for sharing that. And it's a nice segue into the next question, which is thinking about which issues have most concerned you about this pandemic as they are unfolding?

RB: The issues that have most concerned me, mostly tied to issues that were top of mind even before covid broke out are at the baseline level, our healthcare industry. It is very fragmented; it's not very coordinated if anything the health insurance industry or the health economy fights against a top-down, more communalistic response just generally. All the different organizations, all the different insurance companies, private hospitals all of it is built to not be managed or make it hard to manage. and People's Health and the way people behave all of that is already fragmented and at least my vision of how things how things would be managed to run tries to simplify that as much as possible because of the way you know humans tend to act and behave when they're stressed out or scared and having a level or consistent way to access care that doesn't require paying or who can treat you for this and that disease or illness based on your level of insurance was already such a mess and was exasperated by the pandemic. As far as the economic downfall or economic consequences to needing to shut down the government board meeting to shut down parts of the economy there's so much relief that the government can provide to people and so much money that the government sees fit to give out and yet the same problem I saw before covid is what I'm seeing now is that it's only wanting to give that money and relief to people who already have those resources. To companies, to corporations. So the folks that are at the bottom or not being able to access healthcare are having a difficult time accessing that healthcare. The folks at the bottom who are having a difficult time having work or getting work or earning enough money to take care of themselves and their family are finding it even harder to do that so the pandemic really exasperated and made worse the issues that I wanted to fix before this pandemic struck.

CT: Right, And this definitely aligns with the next question, thinking about how the pandemic has directly affected Bushwick what are your thoughts on that?

RB: I live about a block from the hospital two different hospitals and I could tell from the numbers that the city was really struck down by the pandemic and I felt it without having to look at the numbers because I heard ambulance after ambulance after ambulance at the height of the pandemic. I also saw the trucks outside the hospitals, Which carry the bodies of people they could not fit but beyond that there are a lot of families who are missing a loved one missing a caretaker and that reverberates through so many different avenues. The work that I try to do to help a little bit was through Mayday space and with another Mutual Aid group and it was to fill in the gap for people that could not afford to work or buy food in other ways folks were not able to get benefits from the government, from the federal government and were not able to pay their

rent. And as much as possible I tried to support my fellow DSA members especially through rent cancellation and rent strikes. So I think that soon enough we're going to see the reverberations of people not being able to pay rent and I'm fearful about evictions and what the housing situation will be once the eviction moratorium is lifted. So even though the initial Health crisis seems to have abated, I think that's so much of the lost income and people fleeing, really because they're scared, will not reset in a way that's thoughtful and will allow kind of altruistic kind of people to come in and take advantage. So the speed with which Bushwick was already going through and continuing to go through gentrification I fear is going to be said even quicker now because of who unfortunately passed away during this time and the space they've left prematurely.

CT: And they are valid concerns definitely. I'm thinking what are some of the neighborhood strategies that have been emerging as a result of the crisis? you had mentioned that there were some things that you were doing through Mayday and mutual Aid. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

RB: In Bushwick, there is more public housing in Bushwick than in other neighborhoods in Brooklyn, let alone the city. There's a higher number among those residents are black and brown residents, older residents, but also multi-generational and it was already a struggle for the food justice or food banks in that neighborhood to fully sustain the community. They're still hungry even before the pandemic and even though there were many good nonprofits in the neighborhood that we're doing as best they could like Meals on Wheels and other programs they were still falling behind then covid-19 and there's even more people who need food assistance and not all of them, especially because our administrative systems are depleted or overrun or [there are] undocumented [residents] that cannot access all the benefits that they could. This was seen through many neighborhoods but because Bushwick has a higher propensity or higher density of NYCHA homes or public housing, there was an extra, there was a bit of a caveat of the mutual Aid work that MayDay did or that MayDay was a part of. Which included taking some of the excess donations that restaurants had on hand and they were sort of flooding the coffers of City Harvest which was great and we were able to take some of those donations and they were distributed by us among 10 or 12 volunteers a week, on a weekly basis grabbed all the food bring it to the space get volunteers to come in with with all the appropriate protection and we would rebundle and repack the donations and then physically deliver them to the nyca developments. At a certain point some of the developments were able to be trained and do this bagging on their own as we were able to model the distribution that we were doing and this model also used for other Mutual Aid groups one group of which is also using the space at May Day to handle their own list of community members who don't necessarily live in nyca housing but are still very much obviously in need. This kind of model was a turn from other groups who were buying food. Eventually we were also given a grant from a local grocery store chain in order to better, you know, get more wholesome bags to our neighbors in nyca homes. Furthermore because we don't want it just be a charity necessarily we obviously want to help people and feed people we also provide other literature in flyers in the bag grocery bags because sure someone's hungry you want to feed them but it's very possible and likely with

everything going on that this person needs assistance either for housing or for mental health or maybe even cash assistance so we compiled a list of resources and an explanation about the work that goes into these donations and put them in the bags every week and print out hundreds of Flyers to include in that. While this kind of model is a bit different than what's going on in the rest of the city, I think because of the high propensity of NYCHA homes it does require a bit of a tactical change, a bit of a change, on how to do that work.

CT: Right and this is really interesting. With these initiatives, are there any other organizations or with whom have you collaborated or worked with to get this work going, this initial work?

RB: One group is City Harvest and we gained access I guess to their pipeline through a couple of other organizations one is called Universe City. Another is I'm totally blanking is it okay if I look it up?

CT: Yeah course. Because it's such a collaborative effort you have to work with, to even get through that I'd love to get your thoughts on that as well, the organizing work that goes behind to get this work off the ground.

RB: The other group is called the Brownsville Community Culinary Center, or BCC, and it's a culinary co-op. City Harvest is one of the largest Food Bank suppliers and coordinators, Universe City is kind of a co-working studio space similar to Mayday and they do workshops and have aquaponics going on there. During the last two and a half months besides the volunteers who have joined through Mayday, Bushwick Ayuda Mutua is the primary mutual Aid group that we've been coordinating with on these distribution days. They have two days they do one day with us and they have another location where they do it on Sundays and then we've been using the church area of the building we typically have our events in we don't have our events in that Sanctuary space with the blessing of the Bushwick Abby and Iglesia Santa Cruz we've been able to do the work more speedier and there's two doors that go into the sanctuary so we've been able to give Bushwick Ayuda Mutua with their own lane and so MayDay takes up its own space. It's really worked out given the resources that we have to create the safest possible space to do this kind of work. You know it takes about eight hours throughout the course of the day to have everybody come in and unload and repack then reload.

CT: Thank you so much. I'm thinking that as you're interacting with the folks who are collaborating with you on these initiatives, what are some of the issues that you see tenants and residents facing as you're interacting with them, and what would your demands be to Municipal leadership during this time as you're seeing firsthand how this is affecting Bushwick residents?

RB: It seems like the biggest issue I mean unfortunately is kind of federal federal level issue I think they could provide more when it comes to the states they try to have cover what they can provide but what the city can do is cancel rent or at least extend the eviction moratorium I would say that I don't have a ton of interaction with the community members as we are sort of the middleman you can say however during or especially during the school year there was a lot of

recognition or realization that folks did not have access to technology and if or even internet or steady internet. If Cuomo moves forward or the mayor moves forward having school be completely virtual what kind of bottleneck what kind of tension is that going to create for people with school-age children and I think that someone who doesn't have kids it could be easy to forget forget these issues as someone who has ready internet for myself that that is one thing that the people in this at the state level could I guess put more effort into more priorities into making sure everyone has tell spectrum they can't charge people or lowering the rates to a more affordable level providing iPads for some kind of technology so that at least if we are only going to have virtual class that it is going to be accessible to everyone.

CT: Absolutely. With all this work I'm kind of thinking about it covid is pretty global in its scope, how does it impact the work that you're doing locally here in Bushwick?

RB: I think he can be easy to see how big a problem is and kind of shutdown and this pandemic while it is a global issue the difference is I think how places have handled it really tells me that the local matters even more to the extent that anyone can control what happens to them or to those around them. I think you must prove that you can control what is closest to you or control to the best of your ability without coercion and all that other kind of stuff. You need to prove that you can control what's around you and once that sort of been conquered I think you can credibly look outside and try to fix a bigger issue at least that's the mindset I'm in right now and and maybe this isn't related so much but when it comes to the protests that I've been happening the past couple of weeks and the degree to which every state and every town is having an uprising at the same time at least it proves my point in so far as everyone is looking locally like it's a national and international problem that is being enacted or people are trying to change it where they live and I think that is a a good sign.

CT: I totally agree I think it's an interesting dynamic to witness during this really complicated time. This emphasis early on in the pandemic where it's been like self-isolation, flattening the curve and thinking about the care of the internal, of the individual. And then everything hit the fan in May, with all the social protests going on. What are your thoughts around that and how have you and your family and friends and community responded to these requests, while self isolating? How do you engage with your community and how do you help each other out during this complicated time? If that makes any sense.

RB: I think the response has been really all over the place from my family to even... let me start over...

CT: You're doing really great by the way.

RB: Thanks. I would say that my family has been as cautious as you can be and I think that it speaks to a bit of identity. I think the fact that black people were dying at higher rates of covid has influenced my family to be more cautious and overly cautious during this time and have been self isolating very consistently and strictly I guess you can say. Within my friend group I

think it's pretty similar. I would say I'm actually the more reckless or maybe that's not the right word I've been out the most you know I'm still working I think I'm one of the few people in my friend group who actually whose work makes them go out and about in public. I wouldn't necessarily say I'm an essential worker cause I don't know how long I'll be working If we don't have events soon, but my work is not able to be done remotely for the most part so...[siren blares] you hear that siren?

CT: Yes, another reminder...

RB: Yes exactly not over, not over. So among my peer group and friends, I'm the one I probably been the one who's been most out and about than all of them I definitely have some friends who are working for restaurants and delivery and so they work on the takeout delivery window and they wash their hands what struck me very early on was how much the economy was still going. Like for a lot of people psychologically it's been like everything's been like shut down but really it's all been kind of fun or frivolous things that have been shut down and a lot of people are still and we're still doing this whole thing working and to various degrees of safety so folks in my family I think we're very good about following the rules and myself walking around and being out in public I definitely am a real follower in that regard but noticed in Bushwick that the rules weren't being followed, maybe not as rigidly as in other black neighborhoods to be honest. It's sort of anecdotal you know, talking to friends in my peer group about what their neighborhoods look like and all that kind of stuff but you know I can't be too salty about somebody being at the park while I'm also at the park so you know. I went on the train yesterday, took a Amtrak the other day and I just voted in person and you know everybody had masks on and everybody had gloves and I think people like to have fun and they like these frivolous things and to the extent that we don't have that really to fall back on to distract us, I think Civic engagement is really up. If things get bad again and we need to really self isolate and flatten the curve again, I think that I'm hoping that the lesson will be learned and we'll really do it this time and the state will heed some of the demands that some of folks have made The first time around once they, once more people see how bad it is.

CT: Absolutely. And I mean it's an interesting time because at the same time it's something that that there's no precedent for what we're experiencing, either as individuals or as community members, for folks who care about the hood who want to make sure they we're taking care of our own, but there's also this transformative potential that many folks are talking about around the pandemic. What are your thoughts on that, and what can we learn from this moment?

RB: I guess you could call me a soft accelerationist. [laughter] I don't believe in making things worse but I do think that when things get tough people have to make decisions or pick a side. There's no guarantee that more people will pick the right side or whatever side I think might be the right side at that moment. What you can do and what you must do is try to give this context whenever things are at these kinds of tense inflection points. And people, other actors, state actors, corporations will also try to provide context but we'll also try to lie to you and it's the responsibility of people who have been politicizing themselves trying to radicalize others that we

continue doing that and we do not let any I think it was Rahm Emanuel who said “You do not let any crisis go to waste.” And it sounds like an incredibly opportunistic, and it is an opportunistic phrase, but it depends on what opportunity you're looking for and what your end goal is. For a capitalist or a venture capitalist or vulture or whatever, their end goal is to exploit that. *Disaster Capitalism*, everyone should read it. But on the other end opportunities exist that encourage cooperation and encourage, you know, rebuilding the safety net. The opportunity doesn't always have to be negative. There's an opportunity for good things to happen as well and that is my kind of read on what's going on now there is no guarantee of a good or bad opportunity winning out, but those that are politicized need to see it and take it.

CT: Absolutely. And thinking about transitioning that to this level of who do we hold accountable in situations of power, how have Municipal leaders and Bushwick leaders responded to this outbreak? How do you perceive them reacting and responding to this in the future in a more concrete pragmatic way that benefits the community?

RB: I think it's pretty good timing that this happened during an election year. when I mentioned a high and Civic engagement I think that's to a lazy incumbents poor fortune that this is happening now, so a lot of it is because also you mentioned how you this is I feel similarly of drift. I can't imagine myself being in power while this is happening. As someone who's had a leadership role and in a volunteer organization and I get a nasty email or you say something or do something wrong and someone calls you out for it or blasts you out on it on Twitter to be helming a pandemic and be in charge of it but that's why democracy is what it is. That's why it should be the way that we conduct our state of affairs because the people on the ground the people who have needs or lack resources are meant to tell you and then you listen and then and then you act and the issue is that those Lines of communication have been so atrophied for only for most people in the community that the response was also very poorly thought-out. I do think that people look at their own Representatives more fondly than they do on other people's it's sort of a triple Washington that Congress overall has a low rating but people love their own Congressman or they love their own representative and I think that plays into a lot of a lot of people's sentiments in New York City they know that something is wrong they know that something wrong happened and something was mismanaged and looking around to find who to blame and taking it face value what Cuomo says and sort of pushing blame on Blasio and kind of trading barbs and allowing council members and other people who have power like police Commissioners you know kind of skate by, sorry where was I going with this, let me think, I kinda of lost my train of thought...

CT: I know you're doing a great job. I guess maybe talking more about the role of these folks in power and what steps you would like to see them take To address this more effectively on behalf of the community like seeing how they got it wrong maybe taking cues from the community on how to do a better job.

RB: I think for example the school issue to the extent that these teachers have an organizing capacity I think it would be beneficial to maybe use that power to leverage a better policy or



some kind of relief to parents to children when it comes to education as far as the new city council members or state senators there is a lot of there's a lot of push towards defending the police for appealing certain policies that allow them that allow the police to hide the records for there not to be transparency so I think when it comes to school schedule being in person or alleviating some of the inequality of Technology there's that piece but I think it's Central to the community proving that has any kind of say in what goes on I think this police budget will show if that exists if that Pipeline and if those lines of communication exists for the community because a lot of people in the community are showing that they want that to happen and if the powers-that-be de Blasio or whoever can't follow through on that then we have a bigger issue.

CT: and you do such a good job of explaining these this idea these links between Mutual Aid and food Security Police reform all of these issues have surfaced as a result of like these have always been pertinent issues but somehow with the pandemic they have become so much more urgent and all of these things have happened and all these changes and pushes for reform have happened at such a rapid Pace what are you Reflections on that and how can that help inform a better future for us as a community here in Bushwick? because I feel like there's just so much going on so how is this all connected and how can this help improve and make a difference?

RB: Earlier in the conversation I was talking about sort of the fractured nature of the healthcare industry and there's a similar issue with how a lot of governments in States work. They kind of pushed aside their responsibilities. They privatized this, they contracted that out and so it dilutes accountability. and it's a concerted effort to place x amount of layers between the people who are ostensibly in charge and making decisions or at least pushing their desires and wants to the people who are ostensibly empowered to make and carry out this decision and I think that was deliberate. And the breakage of that pipeline, of that link between the public, the community who's meant to be pushing their desires and wants and the person who is meant to be carrying out those desires and wants, It's so obvious now because the community needs a lot under the best circumstances if a systems running perfectly you don't notice that it's running because it's solving the problems that you have as soon as it breaks down is when you realize how you realize that something's wrong obviously and considering how much is wrong with the system you can't it's not just a Blasio like trying to fix the Blasio will not solve all the problems it's been broken and broken and torched and sold off into all these pieces that just fixing one won't get all the resources to where they need to go so it's this game of whack-a-mole that...wow sorry where was I going with this again

CT: No you're doing great. Just basically thinking about how to envision the future, what can it hold, how can you envision what that post covid-19 world will look like?

RB: Right so it's not one person is necessarily responsible and it makes it hard to fix. I think I think what that has influenced is this kind of mutual Aid behavior neighborhood pod structure because I think each person each building each group realizes that the state the states messed up and the state can't step in, DeBlasio still out there even if we got him to resign it's still not going to get us food tomorrow. It's still not going to get a services

CT: Right...

RB: And the best way to do that is to break it down by neighborhood and see who in your community can't take care of XYZ and help them help who they need to and granted that is something the state could do if they had more cohesion and more consistency in their mission and who they thought deserve help but they don't so we the community people have to kind of make it up on the go but also have examples a lot of people working these industries or know people, but we also know what we need and once we realized that it's not going to come to us there you know are people among our group who have initiative who will carry those things out and said those things in motion.

CT: You've articulated so poignantly, because that resonates with me about how as advocates, activists and community members there's this tension between short-term, long-term goals but also sort of waking from this deep slumber. People have been so complacent for so long and have taken it as a given that this was what society looked like and then this crisis hit and it sort of surfaced all these things that many folks in our community have been struggling with for so long. Now folks have awakened from that slumber and now they want to get more activated, as you've mentioned earlier this rise in civic involvement. So it's been an exciting time with a lot of potential, thank you for sharing your thoughts about that. So knowing what you know now, what do you think communities and governments need to keep in mind for the future?

RB: I would like some, this sounds stupid, I sound like Joe Biden, but I'd like some unity, but not exactly with another party. But I think that the state has abdicated responsibility in so many ways. I struggle with wanting the state to step in and wanting to be like forget it I'm going to do a commune you know I could get a doctor or dentist to come in and we'll be fine so I kind of wrestle with that internally but I know that you know even though the local a couple of people can solve maybe the problems on this one block I do envision a more coherent cohesive Society where there is one place we can go and take care of our Baseline needs. There doesn't need to be 15 different nonprofits on the block taking care of Oh I'm going off can you ask a question again sorry.

CT: No worries, knowing what you know now, what do you think communities and governments need to keep in mind for the future? And you were right on track with what the government needs to keep in mind and what these local officials need to keep in mind.

RB: Right the goal in the mission should not necessarily be privatizing or contracting I think that if state actors want to prove their worth to their community they have to use the levers at their disposal to solve the problems that are amounting that continued them out the people in the community after they've received some solution can decide whether or not to disperse it in this way or that order to create other nonprofits of the ground obviously I believe people should have some choice in how they organize or recognize this group's needs here and need to be solved this way. However if State actors are going to justify their existence there needs to be bolder

resources, bolder ideas and numbers and offerings put to use in the wider community not just for certain layers of the economy like development or like the police.