

Transcript of Oral History interview with Samuel Nemir Olivares conducted by Ciera Dudley_08.14.2020 via Zoom, recorded on Apple Voice App

Ciera: Thank you so much for joining me today, um, and being part of this project collaboration between the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project and Cities For People Not For Profit, in trying to learn about Mutual Aid efforts in Bushwick in the midst of Covid. So if you could go ahead and introduce yourself to me and tell me your affiliations.

Samuel: Sure thanks for the invite. My name is Samuel Nemir Olivares- Samuel Nemir Olivares. I am part of the Community Board 4, which is, uh, representative of Brooklyn- of Bushwick- as well as the Community Education Council District 32, representing, ah, 19 elementary and middle schools in Bushwick, also known as a school board. And, ah, I am also the newly elected District Leader, ah starting in September, and a State Committee Member, which is the representative of the districts of Williamsburg, East Williamsburg and Bushwick, at the Brooklyn, and at the state Democratic Party. And I'm also part of the North Brooklyn DSA, ah, and I'm also co-founder of Bushwick Ayuda Mutua, which is a group of neighbors doing Mutual Aid since the pandemic started back in March.

Ciera: Great, thank you. Could you tell me a little bit about pre-covid what did your work look like in some of these affiliations?

Samuel: Sure

Ciera: Day to day?

Samuel: [laughs] day to day?

Well, during the day, I work in a civil rights organization, Lambda legal, for advancing the rights of LGBTQ people, people living with HIV. And that's currently. Before, I worked in Bushwick in The Center For Popular Democracy doing communication for social justice and economic justice campaigns. And now at Lambda Legal I also do communications for civil rights. During the day and night, everyday there's almost, my work is meetings in the community with the community.

The Community Board deals and addresses all sorts of issues in the community; from safety, housing, education, the schools, community-based organizations, public events, and all sorts of things reviewed by the community board; street namings, etc. All that you can imagine and all of these relationships with community-based organizations as well as with elected officials. There is a monthly meeting where the community comes together and discusses all of these issues, right. I also think that's one of the- that's the most important meetings where the community has a chance to see, hear, and review and vote for rezonings and also for, individual project development requests and individual rezonings for buildings.

And in the school board, I- just also do meetings about the state of and the funding for our schools and our state capital funding for schools and the infrastructure and also the development and achievement of students in our schools.

And, yeah, I'm very involved very politically. And before, it was more of us advocating to city agencies, for government agencies, and to community-based organizations on the disinvestment in this community and the housing crisis and the issue of displacement and, some more like raising alarm of inequities that we have in the community, that way they will see the deep-seated issues, even before Covid. So when Covid that's why I immediately jumped in, in mutual Aid. I saw a flyer in the street, because I knew that our community members were already, ah, in disadvantage and suffering that with Covid, just a week out of work would be very detrimental to them. So it was like a, a 180- I wouldn't say 360 degrees because we were some sort of a crisis before- so it was at 180 degree turn to accelerate and like now turn inwards into finding solutions from the own community because, by in my experience I saw that the bureaucracy and the way that all this community boards and like the city agency operate, they are not structured to, um, serve the community in a direct way, more, um, like a diplomatic and ah representational way.

Ciera: Yeah, wow. Thank you so much for sharing that, and I'm really excited to learn more about the- the mutual aid work as we go on in this interview. Um, taking a step back I guess, I'd love to hear about how long you've lived in Bushwick and what it's like for you to live in Bushwick.

Samy: Yeah. So I moved to New York City- I migrated from Puerto Rico, um, after I graduated from college, um, because I always identified as a Nuyorican since I was 12 years old. New York is the home of the- particularly Bushwick and Williamsburg- the home of the largest Puerto Rican migration ah, of US citizens that have second-class citizenship that come from the colony of Puerto Rico with a very oppressed economic and also societal oppression. So ah, with lack of opportunities for youth, uh and also like sexual repression for, you know, homophobia, I grew very admiring of the Puerto Rican migration that came to call New York their home, and the Nuyorican communities who, um, make Bushwick, Williamsburg, and Harlem their homes. So I grew up very, kind of, low-income, but I had enough education to read about these figures and the diaspora, and um, that kind of like reverse migration from New York to Puerto Rico and back-and-forth. I also had family who, you know, used to live here, and um, I felt that kind of connection to the Nuyorican identity, and that's how I identify. And so for me when I finished college, which I didn't know English at all, I stayed there to learn English so I could come and live here. Um, and I came to New York City around six, seven years ago, and I've been in Bushwick around three-four years. And for me, living in Bushwick, it is, kind of my home. Because it represents the legacy of that, of that Puerto Rican-Caribbean migration and represents the struggles and the hurdles that our, um, Latino families have to, have to face, into migrating from our places of origins- because Puerto Rico is not a country. And, I am half Puerto Rican and half Dominican. So the majority, a lot of the the long-time residents from Bushwick, are the first or second generation of those Puerto Rican families who fled the crisis in Puerto Rico in the 1950s and 60s. For example, Robert Camacho, who is the third generation of- second generation of- he's the chair of the Community Board; Maritza Davila, the assembly woman; and Nidia Velasquez, our congresswoman- she also came, similarly like me after college, um, and joined politics five years after being in New York. So all of these community

leaders we have in Bushwick are representative of that, um, collective struggle of the Puerto Ricans and Dominican, um um families. So for me, it is kind of like comforting to, to know that I am in a space where immigrants are welcome, where immigrants are not only welcome, but it is an immigrant-run community, that we all share the struggle regardless of whether you came from Puerto Rico or Dominican Republic, that co-living, you know, with other, now, umm racial and ethnic groups that are coming from all across South and Central America, and other- from all over the world. I think it's the- the ultimate melting pot, and um, it is that community that appreciates- a very thriving community that appreciates art and culture, but also each other. And it is not, it does not prioritize profit, nor economic status. So here, the values of family, the values of solidarity and mutual cooperation, the values of supporting each other, of lifting vulnerable communities, of religious, uh, faith, uh humanitarian work and of advocacy and activism are very valued. And I feel at home, because it is what my values are, rather than an elitist space that prioritizes, um, income and exclusion. Ah, it is also, interestingly, and also now because of the displacement, has a large influx of LGBT, queer, and younger generations that have fostered this very LGBTQ-friendly, um, environment. And, um, I feel that my identity as a Dominican Puerto-latinx migrant spanish-speaker and also queer are all well received. And I feel that it is a very extended family, and um a lot of long-timers have adopted me and cooked for me.

So living in Bushwick is comforting, um, it is, but it is also the other side, it is very frustrating for me as a humanist, as a comedic citizen of social justice. I won't say citizen- as a comedic person of social justice. I am not saying citizen in solidarity with all those undocumented families that live here that are active members of our community who cannot call themselves citizens because of the unjust immigration laws. But it is frustrating to see how marginalized, abandoned that this community is versus others, right, and the inequities. So seeing as day to day how different our families live because of discrimination and because of like lack of opportunities, is very staggering. So that's what have, like, radicalized me to really become very political in the sense of active in the community, whether that's in the school board or the community board, because we have to come together and see how can we support each other. Um, I think in a small neighborhood like Bushwick, you can see the interconnectedness of of the impact that each of our actions have. And ah, you can see, you know, when one of our family's building is burned, like their cousin is- it is the teacher of your neighbor. And when someone dies, it was the priest of your friend. And I think that that is, ah, a quality that Bushwick still has. And ah, yeah.

I mean I can speak for a long time on this. Umm. And I think it is as well, it is ah, hopeful to live in Bushwick because you see how this community has been so resilient throughout the decades and how despite the the challenges and the, and the struggles that we have been through, the community has come together and rebuilt it, and kept it, and maintained it since the nineteen seventies fires that destroyed Bushwick, burnt it to the ground and it was completely overtaken by crime and poverty and police brutality and, uh, exploitation from landlords that, you know, basically took over the the- exploited the community to enrich themselves. Um, the community fought back and miraculously, um, rebuilt Bushwick and to some extent kept it for long-time residents and those buildings still belong to the community. Those spaces were built into public

housing and the housing that was reconstructed, was you know benefitted to the low income and working class folk of Bushwick. And you know, however um...yea. And um, that's why I still have a lot of respect for long-timers who went through that. And elders as well- me as a younger person did not live but have studied and heard. And I feel that it is a great example of how can we continue that legacy to keep, like, Bushwick as strong as it is.

Ciera: Mm, thank you so much for sharing that. Your knowledge of, your knowledge of Bushwick as well as your experience is so valuable. And I'm really glad that I'm learning a lot in this process. Um, some of the struggles you were, you were talking about and the resilience of your community connects to the next question of: when you first heard about Covid, what were your initial thoughts about it, um, and have those thoughts changed since the beginning of Covid?

Samy: Yeah, um. My first thoughts were, "we are going into a very deep crisis." It was very um, evident for me, and, um, I measured- my thoughts came from the experience of knowing undocumented families, um, or street workers particularly, because we have a large population of street workers whether that's food vendors or most specifically um, for example the churro vendors and the people- families- who pick up, like, cans- like aluminum cans and like soda cans from the garbage. Uh, we have dozens if not hundreds of families or workers that work in street related that are undocumented that lives in large dwellings of seven, eight people of ten people. So I have spoken with them before Coronavirus of how they were making only two hundred dollars per week, of how their work depended on- this is triggered before, like after Elsa, the churro lady vendor, the vendor, was arrested in Broadway Junction and then another street vendor for churros was arrested in Myrtle Wykoff stop which is here in Bushwick. Ah both were arrested, and we see how the realities of of having to wake up at five am, going to Bronx to pick up these churros to sell only less than two hundred dollars per week while having three, four children, ah, or more, I think Elsa might have like more than seven, that she has to send money to her country of origin. Like Elsa, there are dozens, or hundreds- no no I will say thousands of Latinx families, like immigrant families, who have very low income and were struggling before Covid and were also being harassed by the landlords and pushed out of housing. So the moment that I heard that the city was shutting down, I was- I came in panic mode basically, because I knew that these families were not going to get any support whatsoever. They were- and the thing that I feared the most, which I turns to be true, is that I knew that because of their fear of immigration status and deportation, because their fear of authority, and because of the pride of being workers- hard workers all of their lives and never being dependant of any sort of like public assistance, and also the fear of being evicted because of not having the funding to- the money to pay housing. Those four things were gonna keep many of these families living in the fears living and in the silence, and we wouldn't even know how to help them because they were gonna, like, completely shut down inside their homes, in addition regardless of the of the quarantine process. So I said, "this is gonna be a major crisis." Our spanish speaking families, which I've, that was an advocacy that I had before Covid- in the community board, in the school board, in every board- I was advocating for spanish interpretation and translation, for more spanish representation. And it was mind-blowing to me that Bushwick is seventy, eighty percent spanish-speaker- sixty-five percent spanish-speaker around that, and all of these structures of power and politics and community groups, um did not

provide enough spanish translations. So these families are always left out to some extent from those resources. So I said "when Covid happens- even more so- they would have no translation, they wouldn't know what was going on, and they would not have access to it." So, I was walking, um, I saw this flyer about a group of mutual aid, and I said, "this is what I can contribute for is my spanish-speaking, like kind of skills." And I emailed and I get involved and saying that I wanted to help translate the flyer and like all of their materials and that took me into like a spiral of calls and then every single day the situation became worse and worse and worse. And then from there, I start actually kind of thinking- we were thinking more long term- we knew from the beginning from the first conversation we had was a call and we knew it was gonna take months for us to recover, and that's what we started building the lay groundwork of this group, group that we called Bushwick Mutual Aid first, and then we evolved into Bushwick Ayuda Mutua. And, uh, kept fundraising and bringing neighbors together, and today we have 1,100 Bushwick neighbors in a group chat and ah hundreds have volunteered, and we have served over like five thousand families. So every week- so the work that we're doing now is, every Thursday we do food distribution from Latinos Unidos to around two hundred families, which is around two thousand to three thousand people. And, um, as well throughout the week are just also filling out a lot of emergencies and like very basic things. But we are stuck in fulfilling basic needs- it is outrageous and it is demoralizing, and it is infuriating, because we are not talking about- it is not even like we are getting the federal business loans, we are not talking about like mayor-issued grants. We are talking about major issues of survival, rather than what would be next, right. Parents are still not even thinking how they are going to send their kids back outside, they are thinking how are they going to cook tonight. The seriousness, the dire situation here is most of the families that we are getting, you know supporting, is that they don't even have food for the next three days, right, that so it's just that they are in survival mode. And, and that's the situation that is still happening here, and even that the state is going into phase four, and some people and neighborhoods have moved on into reopening their jobs and their businesses and their operations, Bushwick is still like, before phase one. They are still unable to leave home, they are still unable to work, and they are still unable to feed their families. We have thousands of requests for diapers, thousands of requests for toilet paper, um, for soap. For soap. And um, these are the, the, statistics or the symptoms of why our community was hit so hard, um in Covid, and that's why we got one of the first deaths. The first death was in our hospital- and why, you know, Black and Latinx families are the ones that have higher rates of the infection.

So we are still in full crisis mode and actually, actually we are getting worse right now. So for every week that passes, we are literally at the peak of the necessity, not at the beginning of it. At the beginning, some immigrant families, spanish-speaking families, undocumented families...some Bushwick families had some sort of few savings, ah, and and and they used them for a few weeks, but now as this crisis drags on- we are righ now 5 months in- they have lost the entire little safety net that they had and their families of their countries of origin send their money back to them and they are already struggle. And as the federal aid stimulus check pass, many of the undocumented does not appy for unemployment, unemployment and extra benefits. Now we're having, like major, major need. For example, for mutual aid, we have around five hundred families in wait for food. So what I like from the Ayuda Mutua work is that

the community once again came together regardless of gender, race, like, language. We have built, like an amazing collective effort to support each other without asking too much, without asking who is the family, where are they from, just like what they need- here it is. And I guess that what has sustained us here in Bushwick, um for the moment, and um, I think now that the next phase will be the fear of, right, what will happen with housing and potentially evictions as, uh, the state reopens and the state declares that we're back to business so therefore you have to start paying back your landlord and like ah the debts you have while they're just literally beginning to address the situation.

Ciera: Related to your work with Bushwick Ayuda Mutua, I'm curious to hear what, what communication methods are organizers and community members using? So within this kind of huge project that has emerged with neighbors taking care of each other, um, what are some strategies that you have used to adapt to this situation.

Samy: Oof [laughs].

Um, every day has been an adaptation process since the very very beginning. I feel we have communication every single day. We are highly reliant on technology, so we have used all the technology, um, tools available to foster communication and conversation. We have like basically daily and weekly calls since the beginning of the process. And then using tools like Facebook and WhatsApp and Facebook and all sorts of technologies that allowed us to communicate internally and also absorb the amount of volunteers that were trying to you know give their skills and offer their skills and offer themselves as volunteers, but I have to say that I am talking about the all whole broad range of technology just not only high-tech, like Slack, but we set up a Google Voice phone number. Think using technology that allowed us to reach or be available for Spanish speakers, for elders, for you know seniors that might not necessarily have to use technology so we have used technology to make it simplified, for example the whole entire mutual aid operation is based on this Google Voice number that I created- we created- you know from the internet, and like we get the phone calls, and then those calls get go to an email and then from that email we call them back and get their information, and from there we are able to see and assess how many people they have in their families and how can we support them and getting into a list. So I think that the tactics have been, you know, used all sorts of technology to communicate with each other to get input from the community. Um, coalition-building: we have worked with, we have established relationships with Mayday Space, Make the Road, Immigration Services; um, with collective book stores, Mil Mundos which is the only bilingual store in book Brooklyn and um, many other groups. I mean tenant groups, advocacy groups, and I think that's just enriched the level of the service and the support and also working in coalition as well as, um, relying on expertise. So you know all every volunteer brings their own sort of like level of expertise. So many of them know about finance, about fundraising, about social media, and I think everyone has brought that kind of, like, skills. So they operate mutual aid like a start-up, where everybody bring their own energy and expertise and I think that that has been super helpful to sustain the work because people are actually developing and working on the skills that they know best. And also that technique of, that strategy of working in community. I think that, you know, having a robust presence in the

community and that sort of solidarity you know, having a strong value and mission statement that is rooted in the community and a very clear message that what we are doing is just to help families go through the immediate needs. Um, and um, and we have been able to sustain the Mutual Aid groups for five months and it has raised over one hundred thousand dollars and it is definitely, what started with five people in a call in March, now has grown to dozens of volunteers. Like I would say active fifty to seventy volunteers weekly that take to do the entire operation, it is a collective effort and it is amazing. Also Latinos Unidos opened, opened their doors where business should not be open, and community centers should not be open but there were no food pantries open because the organizations that operated food pantries had to close because they had paid staff, who they have to follow health guidelines because they had to follow employment laws, labor laws and because [laughs] they have to be guaranteeing. So all the food pantries were closed. So we took a huge risk that was probably, you know against the guidelines and the law probably to actually operate against the common sense, because we had to, because families were hungry, and because we knew that it had to be done because there was not a single food pantry open the first three four weeks. And, um, we saw the families almost crying, calling us desperate. Like literally single mothers with children that I got those called and it was like heartbreaking. They, they had to choose between going hungry or like going out with the literally, it was a two weeks newborn. So, you know how do you tell a mother with a two week newborn "don't go out of your home". Like at the same time she has to go buy food but she couldn't go out, first because she had a newborn second because she didn't have the money. You know so really those are with those situations of the families that we were serving and we feel very strongly- and I would do it again- that we needed to put ourselves out there in a very few group of volunteers risked ourselves and took all the measures to have a very large space you know in the community that was very trusted. Like which Latinos Unidos have been there for 20 years and also with the trusted community leaders. You know we had like the had the, Mil Mundos, Maria you have the people from the community board. We had some sort of collective effort to serve the immediate very drastic needs and I think that it was worth it.

Ciera: Wow. That's amazing. The operation that you're running and in partnership with so many people is incredible. Um, you mentioned that one of the main challenges, both before covid-19 and now, is housing in security and risk of eviction. Um, would you tell me a little bit more about what challenges you encountered in discussing housing and the eviction crisis during covid-19?

Samy: One of the main reasons of people are hungry is because the fear of eviction. And I don't know what to which extent this makes sense to people but the food insecurity stem not because people do not have the money to buy food. Often times, they could figure out a way to make one hundred dollars per week some how, to do some work, risking their lives in some sort of service to buy their food. However, the fear of eviction, and housing instability, and landlord harassment- ah harassment from landlord. Is so big, so, dramatic, that these people that our families, our neighbors were willing to go hungry and literally to pay rent. So the majority of the families that we serve they pay the first two three months- I don't know how and they didn't know either. They spent all the savings that they had, they went out and worked, and they pay their rent, and then they thought about food. So the level of desperation and oppression and fear that

you have to forgo ah such a critical life-savings, basic need, and not having enough food for your children, but you have to choose between having a safe like shelter or food- it was heartbreaking. And that's why we were actually, because of housing, we were doing food. So it's very interconnected and then we knew that if we provide the food it was some sort of, ah, relief for many families, because they were adamant of not paying rent because of the uncertainty of- the and may lack of information then because the eviction moratorium was not publicized enough, and most people do not understand it. And the people who knew it knew that was a catch for all, you know, temporary solution, and they all said "well yes, we cannot get evicted now but then if I don't pay rent then, and I will be, you know, I have to pay that huge back." So I think that they, their knowledge about, their intuition that they knew that the city and the state we're not gonna have their backs, that there was not going to be any solution in the long-term to help them with the rent and housing crisis you know kept for them to pay rent and prioritize it in fear of eviction.

Because in fact, many of them were harassed by their landlords. The most recent one was last weekend on Saturday we went to 181 Palmetto Street to protest a landlord who was trying to evict a woman who was living by herself after the roommate moved, and the room was empty so he [the landlord] was not making enough money and also the tenant has been unemployed for a few months, and he was not making any rent out of the apartment. So he actually forced a fake, he hired an agent to fake a roommate to this woman before the lease was up and without any notification and the videos are very harrowing and dramatic where the agent hired, like kick down the door, literally broke the door while the woman was inside and then harassed her and like came to her body, you know violating her intimacy, and then the agent smoked on her face knowing that she was asthmatic and she had complained to landlord about that. Um, the person intimidated her. And, you know, it was a horrific and a literal representation of what landlords are trying to do, where they broke the door and they literally tried to kick her out of the apartment with violence. And we stood up with the community and the assembly member Maritza Avila said "this is not new." We have been living this for 30 years in this community, where landlords have tried to evict us have burned buildings to get the money from the insurance companies and have for so long many of these undocumented families been intimidated by getting services cut down like gas, heat, electricity not picking up the garbage, not showing up so they are and disappearing, literally like ghosting the tenants so they have fear. And all sorts of intimidation tactics that they have so professionalized; to sending threatening letters knowing that many undocumented families or Spanish-speaking families, first will not understand the letters because they are in English or because the language is so thinly veiled threats that many of these families actually end up moving because they fear they have no legal protections and um, or legal representation or advice, and they have been pushed out sometimes because they gave up after living in a space where they have no heat, you know in winter, stuff like that and no stove. So, back to Mutual Aid, we saw and heard from many families of how housing was in the top two priorities after food. And I feel frustrated and and our lack of incompetence that we honestly couldn't help more. I mean it was we had, what, like four thousand families or more in our database and they all couldn't pay rent. If you know you multiply, we would literally have a million dollars that we would need to have to do a cash assistance program to pay rent and you know I'm sure we would have loved to do that, but we

could raise at much as three thousand per week to buy food, so. So I think the connection between housing and security during closing was striking and it's still happening and now as the fact that we had to get involved, I think me personally not as mutual aid but in Cancel Rent advocacy, in housing organizing, in advocacy about rent strikes and the public pressure on rents strikes and Cancel Rent. As well as pressuring our elected officials unfortunately Democrats or people who call themselves Democrats, like Governor Cuomo, who you know, took no protections for tenants until months later but people have mortgages, they did because you know it's protecting homeowners that some sort of like uh middle and upper-class that have more access and like are more connected to the political class and their political donations. And it is very infuriating that no action was taken for protecting tenants the weeks and months, and we literally have to beg for extension of the eviction moratorium every time until the last minute, and it feels that were like a horse, like race of- I cannot find the English idiom to express how frustrated we feel every month to be like pushing and trying for them to understand that this eviction moratorium should be, you know, perennially permanent and no one should be kicked out of their home. And I think that you know people not knowing when this eviction moratorium ends, like what are the extent of the protections has a lot of people in anxiety and hampering any whatsoever situation for people to decide whether they're going to stay or move out of their apartment, what job that they're going to take, or how they're going to have decision-making for the few funds they're going to funds that are have for unemployment whether they're going to pay rent or should I spend it on food and immediate needs. So I think that that has the interconnectedness with housing and food insecurity in Bushwick. And we have been partnering with organizations like MayDay Space, Mi Casa No Es Tu Casa, St. Nicks Alliance, Make the Road and others who have been putting housing information and advocacy to the grocery bags for families and, ah, that way, yeah, that way to some extent to keep people informed to some extent to the very few resources that have been put in place.

Ciera: Could you tell me a little bit about some of the work that you were doing organizing in housing justice before Covid, through the Bushwick rezoning for instance, um and whether the Covid pandemic has changed your opinion about how to navigate this process of eviction and displacement in Bushwick.

Samy: We could be one hour with this, with this question. So, the Bushwick community plan, I mean we can go back thirty years but, I want to, a brief overview is that every district in New York City, every community, is ruled by a city planning zoning. And Bushwick zoning stems from forty, fifty years ago. It has not been in touch since I believe the nineteen-seventies. So the zoning back then is very different and there are a large manufacturing areas and residential areas that no longer exist. And very little, um, recreational park spaces. So that goes to say that it was, it still is a working-class community, but it was mostly, um, you know, large family dwellings and a family neighborhood. But still the buildings had a very kind of unique structures of three-story buildings etc. So it was a very particular zoning that was the traditional in the community. For very, like, you know large families with small communities. Family- oriented and and um, very kind of like close, interconnected familiar relationships so to speak. So, in, um after the Williamsburg rezoning and after like the development of gentrification and displacement that started in Los Sures, right, over twenty years ago. Started kind of pushing

from the waterfront in Los Sures; that was ninety-nine percent black and Puerto Rican, and now I can say it's over eighty-ninety percent white. So I think that the trend started coming all from like the rapidly demographic change and Williamsburg as well as the western part of Bushwick. And um, I'm I feel like that it's coming all from the Waterfront of Williamsburg, east Williamsburg, and it keeps coming this way towards the eastern part of the Bushwick and Broadway Junction and it will go to Cypress Hills. This is a simplistic, way but of course it's also happening simultaneously throughout the entire neighborhood, but I think that the the huge influx of of first displacement of black and brown communities, families, and tenants in Williamsburg and East Williamsburg, you know kind of pushed out many of the long-time residents and low income families towards Bushwick or even further to Queens and other neighborhoods surrounding. So I think that's the trend that landlords, the path that they follow into in those more rapidly developing, not developing, exploitation of development of luxury, you know, buildings that started, they saw in Bushwick, an opportunity to replicate it. And then six years ago, there was a building I think on Linden Street who appeared or popped up from basically overnight. And it was approved and developed overnight and many long-time community leaders point to that building, as they call, it an eyesore. It was like a warning sign to a trend that was happening silently, right, and little by little, taking advantage of the lack of strict zoning zones and the community kind of being involved in other things, and at the same time, the another rapid way that they can come in by a building and may have developed it. So when this building came up the community board actually came together and wrote a letter to the council members, ah, warning that they are seeing a trend of rapidly, ah you know, first home owners, kind of building owners- landlords trying to harass owners of the buildings to, you know, buy them out and re-develop the buildings into more luxury housing and that this building was not whatsoever following the the character of the district and was developing a luxury housing without any opportunity for long-time residents or low-income tenants to live in there, ripping off the fruits of the labor of the community without any input whatsoever. So I think there was a lot of resentment and also alert into a trend that could, you know, literally jeopardize the livelihood and the integrity of the housing in the district, because the interesting part of- or you know- I wouldn't say interesting, but the it's an unfortunate, it's just it is what it is- the particularity- the particular element of the zoning in Bushwick as that the zoning...I believe I have it here let me see I have a map I have it here in my door...I think the the Draft Community Plan Zoning Framework and this is the DCP. Our existing zoning, R4. So most of Bushwick right now, it is zoned as R4 and what that means is that the developers do not have to get permission basically to redevelop a building. Um, not only permission but they don't have limits to the height or the breadth, of the of the, the height of the building, meaning that they could buy one of the three-story buildings- I mean this is over simplified- in other words as of now most of Bushwick, if the people who own these buildings right now, which many are local or like immigrant homeowners community families who second generations were able to buy this building cheaper thirty years ago, if they decide to buy, which many of them are because the offers have been very lucrative, right very onerous, like millions of dollars that can be made out of these buildings as a value increases and can by these buildings and put a sixteen-story building because the zoning it is unrestricted. So after that, after that letter, the community board, the community groups decided to come together and a large group of people, over five hundred people and like over twelve community-based organizations – we do have interviews for some

several of them - came together to develop what is called The Bushwick Community Plan. And it was the community getting ahead of the city because the city had been starting very ill-intended and dramatic rezoning in other areas that have been- like the Williamsburg and others- that have been ah...the conclusion is that there were really dangerous or negative effects in the community. So Bushwick said "we're going to do our own community plan and we hope that the city follow this plan". So for six years the community has been working on this community plan, on drafting what could look like a rezoning. What a zoning that serves a community could look like. And the interesting part is that while most communities, right, and those who are advocates of tenant rights and advocacy and housing advocacy are against rezonings, Bushwick Community was saying opposite: "this community needs a rezoning." Because we need a review of the lack of zoning restrictions that we have so we can put a limit into the developing of new buildings so when they come in by new buildings at least they have a cap into how many stories they can develop, how much dramatically they can change the facade or the character of the block, and also, also to have a tool to force developers to separate at least twenty percent of the units for affordable housing. The problem right with the zoning in Bushwick, if we don't get a rezoning is that all of the eighty percent of the buildings can be bought, can be developed and they do not have a responsibility or are not forced to include affordable housing. So the community wanted to make sure, one to rezone Bushwick, so as to limit the height of the buildings, but also to force any single new building to have mandatory inclusionary housing or extremely affordable housing. And, um, that is super important. The issue was that then um last year, when we were kind of resuscitating the rezoning, the city wanted to push the rezoning. At that point in the negotiation process, the city came with their own plan who was largely detached to the reality that the community- the plan that the community worked on for six years- and they were trying to first increase way more height of the buildings and completely devastate business corridors and big avenues that would have been a large impact of displacement in those areas as the value of the market went up, but the affordability of the affordable housing is not enough. Because the problem with the mandatory inclusionary housing, the MII, that the city takes to evaluate you know how much, how affordable these units will be, is based on average income statewide, including the income of very wealthy areas. And Bushwick is one of the lowest lowest income areas in the state. Therefore, when they're talking about affordable housing for an average average income, Bushwick families make half or less than half to what that average is. So it is not affordable. It is actually twice to the average money that they will spend in rent. And that mandatory inclusionary housing would have accelerated displacement actually, rather than the opposite, because these families cannot pay the quote-unquote affordable housing, which is not affordable for families in Bushwick. So as a member of the Community Board, first I will have a vote on the final version of the release and the rezoning, but we did not even get there but as part of the community meetings and conversations about how to move forward and how to go about advocating against or you know or on communicating with the city as to what the community wanted for that. And there were several meetings and I think that's the end the process got stalled because we stood together and very firm against the plan of the city that we were not going to negotiate anything less than what the community asked for and extremely affordable housing. And the City backed up, and now it is half victory, half you know, loss, because the community wanted this rezoning, the community needed this rezoning, the community needs the protections and also the mandatory enforcement to develop affordable

housing, but at the same time we were not willing to approve a rezoning that we knew would further accelerate displacement, that does not provide enough affordable housing. So we're in a limbo. And a very dangerous one. And every day that passes, we are, you know, we are letting you know, developers, come and exploit and push and press families, you know, long-time residents to sell the buildings or actually taking the- stealing from them by tricks and like exploiting elders with dementia to buy their buildings and steal their buildings and develop these other buildings. And so I think that we need to act quickly. The first thing that we need when the first next mayor comes, because the De Blasio Administration dropped the ball on this rezoning and it's not going to pick it up, and I think the community has no interest either into picking it up with this Administration that showed their cards that they are not willing to listen to the community nor negotiate enough for what the community needs. So we have to quickly act with the next crop of council members that come to represent this community, but most importantly pressure the new mayoral administration to retake the conversation of the rezoning. So that's where we were. I think now we need to- that's why I got involved personally while the rezoning conversations are stalled- into organizing with Housing Justice for All and members of DSA and State Senate Senator Julia Salazar and others activist of, activism around Cancel Rent, because that was a first most immediate action that we could do to relieve the burden of many of the tenants. As well as some organizing around rent strikes and advocacy. So this was tangential, not tangential, this was simultaneously while I was running for office, and my campaign is District Leader provided a platform for this housing advocacy, and my field campaign director is a housing organizer for St. Nick's Alliance and UNO in her professional capacity, but in a personal capacity, many of my campaign volunteers come from the housing organizing, and we were constantly providing resources and information about the eviction moratorium, the Cancel Rent campaign, the rent strike, and the general focus advocacy from Housing Justice for All. And now we are in conversations about potentially starting exploring the possibility to start a cease-and-desist framework zone campaign in Bushwick- that in East New York is underway- to prohibit buyers and landlords and developers to prey on families here and push and harass building owners to sell their properties, to slow the gentrification and displacement. We are not going to stop it. The only thing that we can do is to slow it to the extent possible that it can drag for years or decades. At this point it is in an acceleration mode, and we need to pull out all of the stops to slow it as much as possible.

Ciera: Um so you talked a little bit about how the Bushwick Community has navigated crisis in the past, um and I'm curious to think about- to hear from you about how you would describe the role of Mutual Aid specifically in responding to crisis, the crisis of Covid and the eviction crisis. And also maybe distinguish how this is different from governmental-based aid, for instance, and how governmental based aid that, as you have mentioned, has fallen a bit short.

Samy: Sure. Mutual Aid was a very novel term for many people, but it was something that this community has been doing for decades. While many branded under the now widely-termed Mutual Aid, this community had been going through fires, crime, killings, displacement, tenant-landlord harassment, you know, unemployment, police harassment. So, I mean all sorts of iterations of and examples of living under poverty, you know: lack of uniform for your children to go to school, lack of, you know, school school supplies, some months have lack of food for

your family, and other months you cannot pay rent, and this community has been helping each other for decades. Lending money to the neighbors and family members, doing backpacks drives every school year to bring like low-income families with back to school items, doing food pantries and like, you know, sharing food with your neighbors. So it is something that has been at the DNA of the community because that's what, you know, low income communities, what we do is helping each other. So I think what happened after Covid was, kind of the professionalization- the expansion and the professionalization of mutual Aid so to speak. The operationalization, where a lot of people that had more privilege, more access, many many of them newcomers to be honest; people who feel that you know their place as being new in the community they feel some sort of responsibility or interest into giving back to the community and many of them educated with many skills to give back to the community that they are now being part of. And I think that this kind of intergenerational, inter-class, kind of interdependent groups, brought a lot of skills that operationalized Mutual Aid to a large scale. So now it's not this neighbor- that also happened during covid- but many of the Mutual Aids grew in large scale. Like in serving three hundred families, bringing, you know, forty ACs, and I think that it's just more like using technology and new skills and organizational kind of like organizational intelligence to fulfill the very own needs that individual families had but in a largers cale. Other groups also did one-to-one families but I think that it was some sort of [cuts out].

Sorry to hear me now? I got cut off.

Ciera: Sorry yeah I can hear you now
Now.

Samy: So yeah, so I think. Yeah just come you guys been doing Mutual Aid for a long time. Now I think there's more people, there's more resources bringing to it. And I think that it was life-saving and critical, because as we said earlier we know that the government is not being able or not interested to help people and families directly with the services that they need and the critical survival services, such as food distribution, such as housing aid and stability. We saw you know, unemployment was not enough, unemployment benefits are not extended to undocumented families, you know, food SNAP also undocumented families could not apply for it. And then he was so large and big that the government, who had always prioritized capital and um had not prioritized, you know human dignity. And the fact that you know we say that there is no money, but then there's also all of this like huge budgets going to the police departments, or criminalization in jails, but are not taxing the billionaires and millionaires. It shows that there's no political will to actually restructure our priorities or to find the money to actually pay families to keep – forget the human part but also the economic part, right. So if you're talking about, you know, from a strictly conservative economic place of the economy, it also make sense to keep families, you know, to some extent at basic income and basic dignity that they could buy you know their basic needs, and and keep them employed, and keep kids out of the street, and keep the families with their basic needs met and the economy circulating so as small businesses do not get impacted and then trigger a larger recession and necessity. So for those moderate and conservative economists and elected officials who are in fear of that, it does not only make sense economically but it is also a moral imperative. That is just humane, that it is just a simple

most- for me I see the role of the government to fulfill the basic needs of the society members and um, it is, I think it revealed the how broken our political and government systems are and how much more work we need to do to prioritize health care, prioritize housing and food as literally human rights, right. And water. And I think that it speaks volumes that, this city, the people have been surviving in those communities like Bushwick based on Mutual Aid rather than the government. And it is very disappointing and frustrating, and I think that we need to continue pushing back because, yes mutual aid, it is very, not idealistic, but I would say it is very admirable, and it is very incredible, and it is very fulfilling the way that we can support each other. But there is an extent to that. There is a limit to it. I think, yes, we're doing a big Mutual Aid operation, but at the same time, you know we can only do as much as we can get in donations, correct. We have five hundred- one thousand Pamper requests standing. So I think that the Mutual Aid will, you can drag it until the sheep takes you on some resources, but communities like Bushwick have finite resources. Our communities are low income or medium income, and there is to an extent that we can operate with donations, and there's a point in which we need larger interventions. That is the only role that the government can play, and that's what we are protesting, and advocating, and screaming if we have to.

Ciera: Thank you. I have one last question that is related to that. And that is: moving forward, what are the issues that you think communities and governments need to most focus on? And that can be, what is your vision moving forward or what are your demands moving forward that you think we should most be focusing on or addressing?

Samy: I strongly believe in Housing First policies and platforms, since I was like fourteen years old. I think that housing is first and foremost the base of society. Everyone should be treated as a human. Everyone should have a right for safe and quality shelter, because study after study, program after program, the ones that have succeeded and the ones I have failed, whether that's a healthcare program, a domestic violence program, a substance use program, particularly of those of reintegration into society and recidivism into society for formerly incarcerated people, all sorts of programs to, you know, help single mothers and homeless families with housing instability, it all stems from housing stable housing. If you don't have housing, stable housing, you cannot get a job, if you cannot get a job you cannot get an income to pay for food, if you don't have housing you cannot treat your healthcare situation in a healthy and safe way. And also housing is one of the greatest, or the greatest attribute, of any job opportunities, of a quality education of the schools where you live, and of the mental health because of the anxiety and uncertainty of where you're going to sleep next month, how much you're able to pay. So I believe that in any political platform and program from the city or the state, we have to prioritize tackling and addressing the housing crisis that we have now, but, we had before. And that was just first and foremost, we have to start from the most impacted and the most vulnerable. And I would start with addressing the homelessness crisis in the richest city in the world, that has three times the amount of empty apartments than the people who are homeless. No one, not a single person should be living on the streets or in shelters. So what we need to address that and eradicate homelessness and we can actually do it, whether that's fulfilling empty vacant apartments, whether they are luxury or not, moving with families children immediately to stable housing and to fully funding NYCHA and public housing. And making sure that every single

homeless family has a house, because homeless families are also the tip of the iceberg of the housing crisis and the research found that they become a loophole for a family to go to housing, and then go back to homelessness. And to the extent that we don't provide stable housing we will continue to have the homelessness crisis and I think that parallelly, simultaneously we need to continue expanding ways to create and develop more affordable housing, quality housing. I think we can do that to fully, you know, expanding and funding NYCHA. We could develop city housing, extremely affordable housing, in city-owned lands- n whatever city owned land that remains in each borough. We can continue exploring and developing Community Land Trusts and prioritizing housing subsidies for low-income families who are not able to pay market value rate. Any rezoning has to be completely – the ULURP process and the City Design Commission Plan has to be completely rethink and redeveloped in a way that is prioritizing affordable housing.

So I think that that's my I think we also need to proactively defend and try to stop displacement and the rapid development, including you know protecting tenants from eviction, protecting tenants from landlord harassment, and I think that we need to make a huge investment for housing subsidies and housing vouchers and and free housing for many of our low-income families.

I want to, before I end, share story of something that happened in Linden Street two blocks from me that paints a picture of what's happening in Bushwick. This seventy, eighty year old elder senior has Alzheimer's and these developers came and made her, you know, sign and sell her building for apparently, I don't know, less than one million dollars, six hundred dollars, sixty thousand or six hundred thousand dollars. And she has Alzheimer's, and they did what's being done in Bushwick. They are exploiting churches, whether it is the ignorance of landlords, of homeowners or building owners, or that whether that's because of the dementia. They are exploiting and tricking them into selling their building, and then they stole the building from this woman, who owned the entire building and had family there and had tenants there. And she was literally in bed, and they came and they sold the building. And then they bought it and they resold it- I don't know if they were trying to do a flip tactic to actually profit from the building. And the case has been to courts for over five years. The family to this day continues to pay mortgages and electricity from the building and the judges have tried to take the building out of her. And the last judge determined that- they sided with the new owners, the landlords, and this woman was forcibly – senior – was forcibly removed from their bed. This woman with Alzheimer's, who had no idea where she was, was forced and she was kicked and like she had bruises. The police that goes and enforces evictions dragged her out of her own apartment in her own building. To this day, the family has not seen a cent from this money. Um, the case is still in court, so I don't understand what was the rush of moving this woman out of her own building. And after, even after the case being, and after the case being in court, the landlord yesterday- this week- are constructing in the building, after they have a permit of non-authorization. They have a stop-permit construction order. And they're violating it, and outrageously continue. The daughter of this woman is completely, has been going through a mental health crisis of trauma. This woman, this Elder woman is living now on a sofa of a family relative.

So this case is going like so many others in the community, where people don't have nowhere to go, they don't know their rights, and these landlords are preying into the vulnerable communities. So I think that that's what we need to address, first moving forward, that now and also at a state level, from bills like Senator Salazar of Just Cause Eviction, no one should be kicked out of their apartments or their homes in New York, as well as many other Cancel Rent and many other housing justice have to be prioritized. So then, because in a pandemic, where people have to stay home, the most important thing is to have a safe home. A home at least to stay. And that's not the reality for many. And yeah, I think that that way we can start addressing the healthcare you know crisis after everyone is safely home, and we will not eradicate Covid and the public house crisis until everyone has safe housing. There is no way to stop Covid when you have thousands of homeless people without, without masks, without, you know with mental health issues who are unaware of the situation, or lack of resources to have hygiene to take a shower to wash hands without access to a bathroom. So I can clean to re-envision completely the intersection of housing and healthcare if we are able to move forward as a city.

Ciera: Thank you so much, this is an incredible interview.

Samy: And I would be amiss to not say and to finish to fully fund schools. Because of the intersection of the education of fully funded schools with after-school programs so families have quality education and they can stay in their neighborhoods and have child quality child care, affordable child care, free child care, so they are able pay, use those funds to pay rent and stay in their communities.

Ciera: Absolutely absolutely. It's all so interconnected. Thank you so much for being here with me and for sharing your experiences and your wealth of knowledge. Do you have any more thoughts or, or anything you wanted to say before we finish up?

Samy: No just to reiterate that housing should be placed as a human right and that we need to fulfill that law in New York of housing every single person, and that until that, we are not going to move forward as a city to address the inequities in health care, on education, and income from people who are still segregated into districts that are red lined- you know that are struggling with the legacy of Red Lining, like East New York and Cypress Hills. And we need to redress and revisit reparations for these communities that are still lagging behind because of the history of redlining that was in New York until the 1960s, as recently as that. And new generations are paying that. So we need to re-envision that, and I hope that the next political leadership- the mayor, the public advocate, and the city council and do radical and transformational revision of these policies and do justice for our communities.

Ciera: Yeah, absolutely. That wraps it up for your interview today. Thank you again.

Samy: Thank you. Thank you for doing this, and for and for considering me.

Ciera: Yes! We are so lucky to have your experience captured.