

Interviewee: Martha Assefa  
Interviewers: Emily Champagne, Miranda Nixon  
Date of Interview; April 27, 2017  
Place: Worcester, Massachusetts  
Transcriber: Emily Champagne



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**Abstract:** Martha Assefa was born in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. She moved to Kenya with her parents and older sister at the age of 3 and lived there until she was 18. When she was 18, she moved to North Carolina to attend Guilford College where she studied community and justice studies. She eventually moved to New England and received her graduate degree in Women in Politics and Public Policy from the University of Massachusetts Boston. Martha moved to Worcester and has been a part of countless accounts of community and political organizing. Today, she serves as the Worcester Food Policy Council Manager. In this interview, she discusses the influence her family had on her and her experiences as a Worcester activist.

**EC:** April 27, 2017. So if we can start, could you just begin telling us about your childhood? Where you were born and raised?

**MA:** Sure. I was born in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania and when I was three we moved away to Kenya actually and it was because my parents were biracial. My dad was Ethiopian and my mom was from Minnesota and it took me a long time to figure out that part of the reason they wanted to move overseas was because they wanted to raise us without the construct of race [laughs] so it was just much easier for them to be a biracial couple in Kenya and for us to not grow up thinking my dad was lesser than my mom and so we moved to Kenya when I was three. My dad was a mediator and he'd go all around Africa trying to end wars which was a little crazy and we grew up there and it was awesome in a very multicultural city in the capital city, where people were from everywhere and lots of different stories and I grew up in the international school system and so that's kind of where I landed. A little bit about my family...I come from a long line of very strong women. Both my Ethiopian grandmother and my American grandmother were both very civically engaged. My grandmother, it took us a while to figure out, that she was also sort of a peacemaker in Ethiopia. There were different families that had experienced war and she would try to mend those family relationships and then my American grandmother used to visit her a lot in the summer time when I came back for college and every summer she would make me volunteer. So one summer it would be like Planned Parenthood then it would be all her political candidates. I always had to do like lots of hours of door knocking and phone calling for them. Other environmental issues I remember being maybe 18 and her dragging me to like a nuclear

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arms meeting at the Senate with like a bunch of silver-haired folks and I was the only young person in the room and all the U.S. senators were like what are you doing here? I was like, “Ask her!” [laughs] So at a pretty young age I was introduced to caring about my community and doing something about it from both sides of the women in my family. So it didn’t take long for me to figure out that I needed to keep on that tradition of caring about my community.

**EC:** That’s so cool. Were you an only child or do you have siblings too?

**MA:** I have a sister who was a community organizer in Worcester. That’s how I ended up here and she’s awesome. She’s since moved back to Africa and is doing some environmental justice work. She designed a program—a master’s program at the university there around environmental science and economics and how to do those two things together. And then I kind of have a few other siblings [laughs] cause my mom’s a mad hatter and would just sort of be like oh this kid is lonely and they really need extra support so one person is really like a sister. She’s a bunch older than my sister and I. She was from Ethiopia and landed in Kenya and really needed more family so she’s like hardcore sister. And then there was another girl who lived with us for a bunch of years kind of like a foster situation but not like I don’t know. It was weird. My mom was always like, “Okay you can stay with us for a while.” [laughs] She’d help the kids out until they got on their feet and you know she still keeps in touch with that person and so does my sister.

**EC:** How long did you live in Kenya for?

**MA:** Three to 18.

**EC:** Wow.

**MA:** My parents still live there. But I knew I really wanted to do liberal arts and this country’s one of the few places that you can actually do that. I didn’t exactly know what I wanted to do. I think at that point I was thinking like theater and political science and community work [laughs] and so liberal arts was one of the few places. Like if I went to the U.K. [United Kingdom], where a lot of my friends went to or Canada, I’d have to know right out the gate like what am I studying and how am I going to get there and I was clueless. I just wanted to like learn a little bit here and there [laughs], have some fun [laughs], so I ended up at a Quaker school in North Carolina. That was very focused on social justice and that was sort of my reintroduction into the South [laughs]

**EC:** What did you major in there?

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**MA:** I majored in community and justice studies.

**EC:** Oh, cool.

**MA:** Which was a major one of my professors created and it was the perfect combination between community organizing which I found out that I really loved and political organizing and bringing the two worlds together. So often they were very much separated and it was the perfect mix of those two worlds and I just thought that was really awesome. It was also when I learned about race [laughs] going to North Carolina in the south and realizing oh wow [laughs] there is so much going on here and trying unpack my biracial identity and solidarity and what does it mean to have a family on both sides of the divide and so that was definitely a lot to unpack.

**EC:** Yeah, what was that like?

**MA:** The first couple of years were definitely a struggle. The first year was like, “Wait, what’s going on?” Like I really need to understand what’s happening here. The second year was like, “Okay I’m going to get more empowered,” and then by the third year I was part of this multicultural leadership scholars program until I graduated that was helping bring folks together and sort of address the underlying causes and we’d work on school policy and we’d work on things in the community. I met like this awesome group of organizers that had been organizing since like the 60s and 70s like they’re kind of like took me in as their grandkid and like helped teach me about a bunch of stuff in a really loving way. It was called the Beloved Community Center. They were just doing awesome work so they helped [me] realize okay this is not a negative thing and there is so much work that can be done here in a really beautiful way then that’s sort of what pushed me in the right direction so yeah [laughs]

**EC:** You mentioned that your parents are very involved in social work as well when you were growing up, what was some of their influences on you? Like what kind of stuff were they a part of when you were growing up that you noticed and saw?

**MA:** Well my dad was always involved in crazy mediations so I remember from a young age like really sketchy characters would sometimes show up at the house and there’d be like negotiations happening and it was crazy. My dad was involved with crazy warzones like South Sudan and Uganda like some of the worst places. But they always taught me that you’re a citizen of the world and you have a responsibility to care and find the best in people and listen and try to get to the bottom of a conflict. My mom was just like such an open person she found the best in anyone. Our house was like always somebody had a problem be it the guard needed to be taken to like the hospital or some random person found out that my mom was curious about the

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medical system and would she like go be like a white ally to make sure that folks got the care that they deserved. She was constantly involved in like little problems, the big problems like always didn't matter who you were she was going to help you out. So I think both of those things definitely impacted me. They're both political and they always voted and made sure that I had political education no matter what. By the time I was 18, I was voting in the U.S. Embassy for the first time and like you know made sure I was registered and ready to go. They're always making sure that I connected the dots between issues and politics and for both of them that was that was really important thing that I learned from both of them.

**EC:** Can you tell us a little more about what your neighborhood and school and community life was like in Kenya growing up?

**MA:** Yeah, sure. So I was very privileged. I lived in a neighborhood that was really close to my elementary school and we didn't really have middle school so it was weird. It was like class 7 which I guess might be 6<sup>th</sup> grade and then you went to high school. And so I was really close to that school. It was an interesting like mixed neighborhood so right on the edge of our neighborhood was like very poor slums so there was always an interesting dichotomy there. Security was a huge issue in Kenya so we always lived on a compound with other families because we never wanted to live alone because crime was a huge—like you know I'd always go to bed a little nervous like okay what's going to happen tonight. So we had a compound and a guard. The weather was beautiful. We always had beautiful weather like that's part of the reason my parents are still there. My dad's like, "I'm not doing winter ever again," [laughs] and you know we had lots of neighbors and just a very active community. We had a house that was always filled with people be it random neighbors who would stop in or my mom would have another kid suddenly [laughs]. Our house was never never quiet and it was in the city my mom always thought it was important that we were close to transit public transit and like you know just assessable. She never liked to be far away she wanted to be close to the grocery store and just close to stuff. My mom always was like it's stupid to be far away from everything so I don't know.

**EC:** Um...so...

**MA:** My school was an international school. The elementary school that I went to was a British school. We had to wear school uniforms and do pantomime plays which were like this really weird British tradition and it was very very British, like white colonial British, and then the secondary school was that as well. But then the last two years I transferred into an international school that I think was kind of run by the U.N. and like the U.S. Embassy. They had these American schools like all over the world and it's because it's for diplomat kids which are leaving

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every 2-4 years, they wanted to have like schools with continued education for them regardless of where they were so that's where I ended up for the last two years and I think it was like an American curriculum. So that's where I ended up for the last few years and then moved here to college.

**MN:** What year was that? Like when did you move here?

**MA:** 2005...yep.

**MN:** And you said you went to what college?

**MA:** Guilford College it was in North Carolina and it was like a hippie, Quaker school. Yeah, we were doing like the college tour and they said in the college tour—I was with my dad at that point. I did some colleges on my own and some with my dad and they said something like, “Oh Desmond Tutu's coming here like in a couple months.” And my dad was like, “If you don't go here, you're crazy,” [laughs] because he worked a lot with him and he was big in civil rights stuff in South Africa and he was like if that's the kind of speaker they want to bring, this is a good place. So that ended up winning.

**EC:** Can you tell us a little more about college? Your experiences there as a women and also involved in peace activism and that sort of thing.

**MA:** Yeah, so I was really lucky to come in international student orientation I made a bunch of really awesome women friends. In the multicultural leader scholars program I made a lot of awesome women friends as well. I had wonderful mentors, wonderful teachers that were like really empowered strong feminists. I started getting involved in some organizing opportunities and I remember at the beginning it was like going to D.C. for like AIDs, organizing activities it was like World Aids Day or something. A lot of anti-war protests that would get on the bus and go because that was like during the Iraq and Afghanistan war. So we'd head on up to D.C. and organize. I remember organizing around gay rights because around that time the issues around folks in the military was coming up and equal opportunity and same sex partners and I don't think marriage had quite happened yet but there was a lot of momentum. I remember organizing around that and I was just really lucky that in the multicultural leadership scholars program there was a lot of women who sort of take you under their wing and be both like a mom, but also like a coach and be like, “No, you can do better,” or, “You can strive better or you can go further.” I had learning disabilities in school and I had really awesome female mentors that would be like, “You're not your disability, you can get past this and I'm going to set goals that you didn't think you'd achieve and I'll help you get there.” I don't know I've always had such strong women in

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my life that it was it was sort of like that's who I gravitated towards and then after that was when I went to do a degree in women in politics and public policy a couple of years after that. And that was when I really started unpacking gender and bringing that into the forefront..

**EC:** So that kind of leads into my next question, what were some of your first experiences outside of college? Did you work right after? Do service work? Or?

**MA:** I did AmeriCorps and that was in a town about an hour away from where college was. That was a really eye opening experience. It was in the nonprofit world. They were doing a bunch of different services for low-income folks between like housing counseling, credit counseling, domestic violence. They had a really interesting program that was centered around the men abusers and retraining them to child unification programs, they were like all over the map. It was like you could never be bored. There was always something different going on. There was a really awesome CEO who was a woman and she was just incredible. She just really cared about the work and didn't care about anything else and she was just really low key and like, I don't know, she really had her shit together. I was so impressed by her [laughs] and she definitely inspired me a lot. Then I moved to Connecticut stupidly with my ex [laughs]. I'd been with him all through college and then that year which was kind of a hard year but I made a bunch of awesome friends and a few mentors that were also women. The nonprofit industry is really held up by women which is interesting. You know, there is some question around pay [laughs]. That field should definitely be better paid, but you know the whole gender gap that's pay equity and stuff that's definitely on display in the nonprofit world, but a lot of those organizations were really held up by women and that was just fascinating. And then I did some political work in Connecticut helping Senator Blumenthal get elected. [I] worked for the Democratic Party, helped do organizing for President Barack Obama. I fell in love with Barack Obama [laughs] like 2007 like junior year of college. Spent most of my senior year working for him. I managed to piece together credits so that I could kind of do it full time [laughs.] I don't know like this is happening so either I'm taking a leave of absence or you're going to figure out how to make sure I stay in school. So I did work for him. We won North Carolina by like 12,000 votes. It was a recount. It was crazy but everyone said that wasn't going to be possible so that's where I really learned a lot about like community organizing and political organizing. Once again really strong women were the ones running that show. It was awesome. That was definitely like my moment for change...like yeah this is awesome and we can do this. So that was like pre-graduation and then AmeriCorps because I found out Michelle Obama did AmeriCorps specifically political allies and I was obsessed at that point so I was like okay if she can do it then I can do it too [laughs]. Totally she's my "shero" [laughs] and then did some random stuff in Connecticut and then I finally ended up in Worcester doing community organizing work.

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**EC:** So, because this is like Worcester Women [laughs] can you tell us more about your experiences in Worcester?

**MA:** Yeah, so prior to moving here it is not a secret, I hated Worcester [laughs]. I'd come and visit all the time and the people were really nice but my ex was a snooty Connecticut boy and was like I hate your town [laughs] and I finally broke up with him and my sister was like, "Come live with me." because family was so far away. So I did and it didn't take long it was like three weeks in and I was like, "Oh my god, people are so receptive to meeting you and listening to where you're coming from and wanting to work together." They don't care what your story is. They're ready to put you to work and I had never experienced that anywhere else. Like if you come and tell people you're ready to work, they'll put you to work right away. I was lucky because my sister had been organizing the community at that point probably 10 plus years so she had a million relationships. My sister was great at over booking herself, so the deal was, I was not allowed to stay home and do nothing. So she'd just give me assignments every day and say, "Hey, I can't go to all of these ten meetings, but you could go to three of them and then tell me how they went." [laughs] And so it was a great opportunity to just like hit the ground running, meet a bunch of folks, they wouldn't be like who is she cause all I'd have to say was I'm Sarah's little sister and they'd be like oh okay we'll like let you in on the secrets you know and so it didn't take long to just start going to meetings and start becoming involved in politics and being part of community organizations. I ended up getting a job with the Worcester anti-foreclosure team which was a really eye opening experience for me. Folks in foreclosure were so fragile and so raw but like so ready to organize at the same time so it was a really interesting experience to sort of be a part of their journey, to help advocate for them, to be a part of protests and organizing and political work all at the same time. There were some really experienced community organizers that really took me under their wing. They taught me a lot about capitalism and what does that actually mean and I had no idea prior to that [laughs]. But they were like really hardcore like go to the root and so that was a really awesome experience. At that time the community center that I was working in was the Pleasant Street Neighborhood Network Center and there was just this office, this co-office space, so I met really awesome organizers. Mary Keefe, who's now the state representative, was the director there and she took me under her wing. I also met my partner there who's now my fiancé during that time and I met other people and they were just like always looking at the neighborhood. How do we organize from the neighborhood level and then connect that up to the federal level. So they really taught me the local organizing piece. At that point, somewhere into the process, Mary decided to run for state rep and I think we were really part in encouraging her to do that so it was like so fun to go from the ground up with her campaign and just like be a part of that journey. So she's one of my biggest mentors. You know now as I'm doing food policy that's who I go to now like anytime I'm at the State House, her office is my home. She's a wonderful cook, she's just great. And so,

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it helped me build really strong relationships there. After doing the Pleasant Street Neighborhood Network Center, the emotional level of the work with anti-foreclosure I couldn't handle after a while. I was like, "I need a break [laughs]." This is too much like seeing family after family be devastated was like my heart's breaking, I just can't [laughs]. I then did Senator [Edward] Markey's campaign and he got in and then I started working on my grad degree which was women in politics and public policy. That was really eye opening to see how far behind we are in terms of really being treated equally.

**MN:** Where did you go for your graduate degree?

**MA:** UMASS Boston. It's a small program that's at UMASS Boston. And so I started working with Raise Up Massachusetts and you know we started working on the minimum wage increase as well as earned sick time. And both of those issues were really central to women, especially earned sick time, and so it was just interesting to be studying this and then looking at the state legislature and realizing we're only a quarter of the state legislature, what's going on there. You look at the city council, we're less than that. I think now we actually made a little bit more progress. Just looking at that and then seeing time and time again examples of women not being taken seriously, having that experience as well. And realizing there is a lot of work to do there [laughs].

**EC:** So then after Raise Up what were you involved in? Or what are you involved in today?

**MA:** We started a small juice bar because part of the experience for me was every time I worked in one of these crazy organizing campaigns and community organizing jobs, I put on weight like all the time and there was no space it was like work all the time, there was no space to cook, there was no space to focus on health and that really bothered me and so we did a juice bar and ran that for a good year and a half and then a customer came in and was like, "You really need to do this food policy job. It's perfect for you. It's a combination of food and policy. That's who you are." And I was like, "Whatever," but he kept coming in and was like you have to do this so I was like whatever so I finally applied and they were right. So I'm now doing food policy on behalf of the food bank, working on anti-hunger which is absolutely my background growing up in Kenya and having family in Ethiopia and knowing what hunger was. I was like, "What the hell are we doing with so much a hunger problem in this community?" You know, 90,000 folks in just Worcester County alone are food insecure. We're the richest country in the world and yet we cannot find a way to feed all of our people with what they need. It's mind blowing. So working on hunger I built up a relationship with the congressman so it was already like this is great this is just an extension of work because that's one of his biggest issues. And then also looking at the food system, and farmers' markets, and urban agriculture, and federal feeding

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programs to state legislative programs, local stuff. So we're working on urban agriculture culture next week at city council. Just being able to work on all levels of government and then connecting people from the food pantry level to foodies who are all obsessed with local food and bringing all those people together. That's the work that I'm up to now.

**EC:** So what's the day to day of that like?

**MA:** It's random, it changes all the time and that's part of the fun is like it's really hard to get bored. So you know it was just budget week for the house so lots of phone calls, lots of meetings saying like hey these are our financial dreams. You know getting folks to come together, asking for testimony, asking them to show up. We have like senate hearing just the other day where a bunch of us turned out. There's a lot of meetings, there's a lot of networking. Tracking how things are going as well. It could be just going out to support local buy local initiatives different programs, writing policy. It's all over the map [laughs]. It could be as simple as hey we have a farmers market and nobody knows about it yet, go door knock and like get the neighbors to come and start using this. It could be so random or it could be going and educating and talking to students and finding out what's going on there. We also spend a lot of time organizing around wages so we know 20% of the folks that come to our food pantry network are working, they're just not making enough. So we've been organizing around the Fight for 15 campaign, doing a lot of work around raising the minimum wage again. So it's a combination of pure political stuff and community building.

**EC:** Throughout these different experiences, how and where have you found inspiration? You mentioned you have a fiancé, like is he involved in this too?

**MA:** We met at the community center, we met at a book signing for this organizer who founded Neighbor to Neighbor which was this organization, it still exists, that works with folks in public housing mostly low income housing and teaches them how to get heard on their issues and they're very like they focus on like getting every building the voting power in each building and so um they deliver like a strong amount of votes so that when they come and they lobby people actually pay attention to what they want to say, whereas before a lot of those communities were just not involved so it was a book signing there so he is both a political organizer and a community organizer. Currently he is running for school committee. Yeah he's always egging me on as well [laughs] especially like, "Hey, serve on that board," you know? I'm the VP of the Democratic City Committee now, probably the first nonwhite person in that position probably one of the younger ones as well so he's constantly looking at the question of how do we make a better world and how do we work towards it and so we're always partners in crime [laughs].

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**EC:** That's so cool. So have we covered all the major movements in Worcester that you've been a part of or are we missing any?

**MA:** I don't know. There's just so much going on. Worcester's so not asleep, it's awesome. There's so many things percolating, you know, I find it really important to be progressive and to be building the progressive base so I do a lot of work around that. Tying all the different organizations together, holding folks accountable to make sure that we're being progressive. I don't know it's anything related to economics to political voice to food and hunger to small businesses and the challenges around that. Oh Lord have mercy there's so many [laughs]. To, I don't know, foreclosure to I represent ward ten which is sort of between WPI and Main South so very low performing voter area so I always work on that, trying to get people more engaged. Anything around equity, race [laughs], gender [laughs], yeah.

**MN:** Are there any particular like peace efforts you didn't take part in or like why you wouldn't of taken part of them or anything like that?

**MA:** Interesting question. I mean, I think I should be way more involved in all the things that are going on in Syria and that area of the world. I just haven't. I feel really bad about it. There's so much going on everywhere. We definitely—oh oh gun violence. That's another thing that we're really passionate about organizing around and it was so easy to organize around it was easy. So we did this big legislative campaign and didn't get as far as we'd hoped. So there's a lot going on that I wish I had more time to help out with. There's a lot going on in Africa right now. There's stuff going on in Ethiopia right now that I wish I was way more engaged in and paying way more attention, I'm just not. Yeah...there's a lot going on and I don't know...I try and take my piece of the pie and control as much as that as I can and then say that and I can like sign on and support I will but I've got a few key projects I always try to keep moving but we have a lot of work to do. I'll be the first to say that we spend way too much in terms of the military so you know advocacy efforts right now for food policy. One of the things we're saying is like the military budget doesn't need to see an increase that cutting social service programs is very important and we spend like what 15-20 times more than any other country you know, we don't need to. And then to boot, the folks that are the ones that are on the front line are the ones that are like coming to our food pantries right? So we're definitely not honoring our veterans in any way. That's one of the hugest demographics that's food insecure which is like criminal you know and so here we are spending a lot of money, not spending it on the folks that should be getting it so yeah. In terms of the budget and politics, I'm definitely a fan of redirecting some of that money in other ways.

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**EC:** So because this is a women's history project, could you tell us some more about your experiences in the movements you've been a part of, how they have been shaped by your perspective and experiences as a woman?

**MA:** Yeah, where do I start? [laughs]. So currently I'm a part of this women of color coalition caucus. It was a lot more recently that I've realized like even amongst race and gender, the intersectionality of those two and lifting up the differences are going on and it took me a long time to realize like even within the women's movement there was like so much difference and so much separation you know learning about Shirley Chisholm and learning about like the differences that were going on so currently in a lot of the work that I'm doing we're trying to lift up those differences even in pay equity. If you look at the scale of what's going on it's like vastly different so trying to be a lot more intentional in the spaces that I'm in about lifting up those different voices and asking are the policies that we're in going to be a fix, are they actually a fix, are they going to the root cause or not. So yeah in that group there's just a lot of awesome sheros that are doing this work in this loving way but, also really holding power accountable. So that's been really awesome to be a part of those situations in those groups they're realizing that in certain situations that men of color were throwing them under the bus instead of standing in solidarity and that if they didn't work in a way to sort of build a safe space to really unpack what is going on they were going to keep losing and so that was sort of the vision behind that work in North Carolina it was just really. I've been blessed to see so many women in leadership positions, really knocking down the barriers to the point that I don't think I realized how much gender played a role in everything until I got more into like a more sort of state house world very dominated by men. Politics is very dominated by men and in those sort of situations I realized like hey [laughs] you've got to address this and call people's bullshit out head on and if you don't you're going to keep getting in trouble for no reason and so I am embarrassed to say it took me a lot longer to realize the role that gender played. I think it was just because I was really blessed by having so many strong women in my life that I was to me it was like, "Well duh," [laughs] so especially doing the graduate degree, that definitely opened by eyes way more and prior to that I really thought through race and didn't think through gender which was my bad [laughs]

**EC:** Are there any particular people or speakers or books that have inspired you? You mentioned Michelle Obama and Barack?

**MA:** I love her [laughs], I love her so much. She's amazing. She's, she's such a steadfast advocate. She is who she is and no one can move her, you know? She's like so loving and so brilliant and she just picks a piece and she rocks it. Sheryl Sandberg's book, I really liked—the Facebook lady, I think that's her name. Right? Yeah so that book was really powerful for me. It

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was really cool reading Sonia Sotomayor's biography and hearing about the struggles that she'd been through. Who else? I'm not the best reader [laughs] but those are some of the women that I just thought were like really awesome. Mary Keefe has been an incredible role model ... who else? Brenda Jenkins is another role model. She's a local organizer in Worcester. Who else has had like a really big influence on me? My current executive like work that I'm currently doing at the food council is run by women and it's awesome to be in a women empowered zone. My executive director is incredible, so humble, so effective. I went to an organizer training last weekend and they brought up this idea of thoughtful charity and I was like wow that's like the definition my executive director. Just like so thoughtful and so meaningful about everything that they're doing and the intentionality and the execution is perfect so she's definitely a strong influence. I don't know there's a lot reps in California that are doing really incredible work. My grandmother—always got to give a shout out to both of them [laughs]. Both my grandmas kicked ass [laughs].

**EC:** What do you think are some of the difficult lessons you've learned in your work in the community or some of the biggest challenges that you faced?

**MA:** I think it took me well I've been through this like regression. When I first started work I was definitely way more emotional which is an awesome thing, but that it definitely one thing we've definitely been penalized for consistently and so it took me a while to figure out in what spaces I am safe to be who I am and what spaces I am not especially when I was younger. Now, I don't care as much and I'm like this is me, take me at face value and if you don't like it, I don't care. But before, a lot of people had more power over me so it took me a while to figure out how to sort of handle my emotions even though they're real and legitimate and so I went through quite a roller coaster of trying to figure out hey how do you deal with people, how do you deal with people that are evil people, and how do you not let them dominate what you're doing. And some people are really good at riling you up and like making you feel really bad. They know how to use that as a tool. So learning how to call that out, name it, not let it affect you, tell other folks that will actually listen if there is a serious problem going on, learning who the right people to tell and who aren't [laughs]. There's was a large learning curve around that for me. Now I'm at the point where I'm like okay I need to get more emotion back [laughs] So I'm working on it. Trying to go back to more of my authentic self and not let that be sort of ironed out of me cause I do see the world through emotions. That's how I know what's right and wrong and I wouldn't want any other woman to have to silence that. And that's one of the ways that they always put us down, you know, and that's totally ignorant. Emotions are completely valid ways of understanding the world and so that's one of the things I've had to grapple with over the years. As well as image... I haven't gotten a few jobs because I don't look the part so especially in politics. If you are not like a very cute tiny person and working in the state house, you're not

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going to—for many years I wanted to be a legislative aide. I don't know why now [laughs] but you either had to be the lawyer and then they didn't care how you looked like there was like clearly like insane intellect behind you and I needed that or you had to be this sort of very cutely dressed tiny little person and that was it. And I didn't really believe that and even friends I didn't think would follow that critique or that model did so that was another thing to realize how much stupidly we place on image and body and realizing the flaws in that. And I would say the state house still has not progressed very far in terms of that, but in terms of men they don't care [laughs]. They're just like, "Oh you're connected to this person and that person so sure we'll have you." So that's been very sad. But now, I don't care [laughs]. I'm me and whatever, your loss [laughs] so...

**EC:** So in all the work that you've done what movements or changes are you most proud of?

**MA:** Oh, for me the most emotional time was working in North Carolina for Obama. I don't think it was about Obama, it was about organizing in the south, seeing communities that never thought it would happen, seeing them get like excited and mobilized and empowered. So seeing the black community in Greensboro just get so excited in a way that they've never been excited before, seeing a new possibility that they just thought was not possible especially in North Carolina. To have North Carolina go for Obama it was just like relationship building and like folks that would never come together being forced to come together and enjoying it [laughs]. I don't know for me that's still—that was the first time I saw different silos really coming together. Ever since then I've been chasing how can we make that happen again, you know, with the Worcester neighbor coalition we are trying to do that work locally like bringing different silos together, but I don't know, I don't know why that was the best experience, but it was [laughs].

**EC:** Did you get to meet Barack Obama?

**MA:** No I never did. I've met Biden and Michelle...

**EC:** Oh, cool!

**MA:** ...but one day. I'm gonna stalk him, it's gonna happen [laughs]

**MN:** I met Barack Obama when I was younger right before he got elected...

**MA:** Yeah?

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**MN:** ...my mom does activists things and so I got to meet him...

**MA:** That's awesome.

**MN:** ...but I didn't, I was young so I was like oh okay [laughs]

**MA:** Yeah

**EC:** So in terms of today, what do you most worry about in terms of social justice issues?

**MA:** A lot of what I'm doing I kind of learned [when] I was between occupy and the foreclosure work. The consolidation of power of a few folks is really wreaking havoc over so many different issues so we see it in our political system, you know, by them changing some of the rules about who has the right to vote and allowing corporations to do that. We see it in the foreclosure industry allowing big corporations to decide the fate of little folks. I see it in the food movement. I see it in so many different places and history's always pitted the little guy against the little guy or the little girl against the little girl so for me it's how do we bring all these different groups together to take back our power? And I think that's a moment we're all trying to figure out. How do we do that in a way that brings us all together and lifts up from the bottom, not from the top? So that's what I worry a lot about. I worry about the fact that back home in Kenya and Ethiopia the ballot box is so sacred, whereas here it's losing that by the day and I worry about us losing that. I worry about the little voice not feeling heard and wondering if the systems that we still have are allowing us to be heard or not. So that's kind of the work that I hope to keep doing [laughs]

**EC:** Cool! Do you have any final questions?

**MN:** I was going to just say is there anything that we missed that you wanted to talk about or...

**EC:** Any questions that we should've asked but we didn't?

**MA:** No, I think you guys are awesome! I think that it gives me so much hope to think about young folks doing this work and doing it at school you know? If it wasn't for my school saying, "Hey, this is what social justice looks like," who knows what path I would've taken, you know? Yeah I had the influence of my family, but when you go to college and are on your own journey. I'm so glad that you guys are learning about this curriculum. A lot of the folks that this school has gifted are really thoughtful, awesome people that are really trying to make the world a better place. Some of the folks that I work with did graduate from here and are in the community

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making that organizing happen. I'm just glad to see young folks like you [laughs] making this change. Because the earlier we can get folks on that page the better. There was many generations in between [laughs] that's sort of said, "Eh whatever," [laughs] "I'm gonna sit this one out," and I think that your generation is really empowered and not doing that and I think that's awesome. I think that's where hope lies [laughs] .

**EC:** Thanks for meeting with us!

**MN:** Yeah thank you!

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