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## A Candid Discussion About Social Justice: Iris Roley, the Black United Front, and the History of Cincinnati's Collaborative Agreement

ASHTON HOOD\*

*In early April of 2001 I was growing up in the community of Glendale, a northern suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio. I vividly remember the media coverage of the civil unrest occurring downtown in response to the killing of Timothy Thomas.<sup>1</sup> The following interview with Iris Roley, member of the Cincinnati Black United Front, attempts to shed light on the origins of the rage felt in the city during that time period. Proactive steps have been taken since Cincinnati was placed in a national spotlight for its embarrassing race relations. Much work still needs to be done to ensure equity, but the energy of people like Iris Roley will most certainly push the City of Cincinnati towards progress. The disturbing tales of police violence caught on camera in recent years have deeply saddened many Americans, including those who have been shocked by the harsh exposure of policies and actions that, for them, have traditionally operated in the shadows. From the Black United Front to Black Lives Matter, the movement against police violence has been catalyzed. Everyone must remain bold in our continued fight against oppression to ensure that the words and actions about progress from people in power are aligned.*

**Ashton:** Hello world, this is *The Freedom Center Journal* and we are here with Ms. Iris Roley to discuss the history of the Cincinnati Collaborative Agreement. First, Iris, what is your connection with the City of Cincinnati? Can you talk a little bit about some of your activist work and the things that you've done to uplift your community? I know you have a very long history, so I'd like to hear a little bit about it.

**Iris:** My connection to Cincinnati, Ohio, is that fortunately for Cincinnati, Ohio, I was born here. Unfortunately for me, I was born here. And I typically tell people that I am of Cincinnati physically, not mentally. By that I mean that we have a thought or image of how we behave as a city, but if we examine how thought or image is played out in how we actually behave, you

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Wilkinson, *Violence Spreads; Officer Shot*, CINCINNATI ENQUIRER (Apr. 12, 2001), at A1, <https://cincinnati.newspapers.com/image/102469239/>.

will see the constant perpetuation of a lack of equity for African Americans and brown people and poor people. That has been the history of Cincinnati, Ohio. So, I am of Cincinnati physically, but not mentally, and I try to fight against the lack of equity here as much as I can.

How did I get to be who I am? My family was a huge activist family in the city of Cincinnati. My grandmother was Vivian Kinebrew. Her pastor was Maurice McCracken. The Community Church was in the West End. And I was born on the front lawn. I can remember, very early on, protesting—whether it was the building of the Justice Center, the building of schools where we didn't want them, or could not participate in the generational wealth of those building, housing—you name it, I've been there. I was raised in what was an old Jewish synagogue in the community of Avondale called the Rockdale Temple. They gave it to the activists back in the early 1960s, to be able to organize, with some sort of agreement: "We'll give you a place to grow your community." It was affectionately called "The Black House," and that's where I learned my political science, that's how I learned what I'm supposed to do in my life, and that's why it's so righteous in me, sometimes defiantly so and unapologetically so. I fight for rights, fairness, and equity. That's how I got to this particular point. It was through a lot of development. I'm still developing and still fighting for the same things that my grandmother fought for, which is disheartening to my soul, to be in the second decade of the twenty-first century, fighting for the same things.

**Ashton:** I'm honored to be in your presence.

**Iris:** I'm honored to be in your presence! I'm honored that you want to know about me and about this work!

**Ashton:** Well, not only do I want to know, I definitely want to make sure that the word spreads. You're a gem here in the community and your story definitely needs to be told. I'm honored to interview you on behalf of *The Freedom Center Journal*.

I want to talk to you about the 2002 Collaborative Agreement. I know you had a humongous role into bringing that into fruition. I was born and raised here in Cincinnati, I remember when the riots happened back in 2001, I remember—

**Iris:** We don't call them riots.

**Ashton:** Excuse me—

**Iris:** Riot is a legal term. You can go to jail for that.

**Ashton:** I'll let you explain that, then I'd like to know how the Collaborative Agreement came to be. We'll call what happened back in 2001—I'll let you define it in your own terms—and just give us a little bit of background so the community can understand how we got to this point.

**Iris:** I appreciate the inspiration to connect the dots because that's all we did. The Cincinnati Black United Front, like any other organization, was formed because something was wrong, and we saw this wrongness being supported and inspired and, you know, cooked in the pot, and it was just spreading like wildfire. So, we formed in the summer of 2000. And we formed because fourteen of the thirty-four downtown restaurants decided to close during the biggest revenue-generating event in the city of Cincinnati. Would you happen to know what that event is?

**Ashton:** I do not.

**Iris:** Take a guess. You get two.

**Ashton:** Does it have something to do with the Cincinnati Reds or the Cincinnati Bengals?

**Iris:** Nope. The Cincinnati Music Festival, affectionately known as the Cincinnati Jazz Festival. So, for fifty-four years that music festival is the highest revenue generator for any event that Cincinnati has. Any event. In two days last year Black folks bought Cincinnati, Ohio, \$110 million in revenue. \$90 million dollars went to hotels and another \$10 million went to food and gifts and stuff like that. That doesn't even count the \$1.5 million just in fees for parking during those two days, or money that was spent in the state of Kentucky—Covington, Newport, and that area. That lets you know how big that festival is.

But in 2000, fourteen downtown restaurants decided that they were going to close on a predominantly Black audience that brings this city so much money. And those fourteen restaurants had tax abatements. Whether it was for furniture, fixtures, and equipment, or whether it was for a façade or, or brickwork outside, those were our tax dollars. I believe there is a 1964 impaction ordinance that says you cannot just shut your doors on people for no reason. Well, the downtown incorporated restaurants came up with a list of reasons: that Black folks steal salt and pepper shakers, they don't tip well, they don't know how to act, they don't know how to behave. They had a whole crazy-ass list about what Black people couldn't do, so they decided they were all going to close together. We formed around that.

When we did that in the summer of 2000, we weren't the only organization out there, thankfully. There were actually five organizations on the ground—grassroots organizations fighting on behalf of the voices in the wilderness of the marginalized, of the poor, and the Black, and the brown, the ones who were not being represented at the table with the downtown restaurant corporations, with the business leaders of downtown, because people thought that type of exclusion was okay. But look at what that made Cincinnati look like, and then look at what it caused. Several restaurants went out of business after that because of the protesting, and the visibility of the people who were mad as hell that they would close their doors on 65,000 people, that they couldn't figure out how to welcome the people who were coming into the city and who were bringing money into the city that would eventually help us build the city. So, we formed around that.

Then in November of 2000, we had what we called “two in twenty-four”: Jeffery Irons and Roger Owensby. These two individuals were the catalyst to the civil unrest, to the Collaborative Agreement, and to the reforms that you see now. They were before Timothy Thomas. And the reason that they are so significant to the work is that Jeffery Irons was a mental health patient who had stolen something from a store, I want to say in Clifton, and was chased by Cincinnati Police and hid under a car and was killed. And then within that twenty-four-hour period, we had Roger Owensby, Jr. Roger Owensby, Jr. was home from the war. He was a veteran. He was a parent taking care of his daughter. He had served in two tours of duty and he was home. And the reason that they were so significant for us is because we had a mental health patient and we had a veteran. And neither of them were described in the media as such. They weren't even given their full description. People couldn't even make an informed decision about what had actually happened and who these individuals truly were—what were their lives like? So when we had the “two in twenty-four” it sent the Black community into a tizzy because we were getting the same responses that we had gotten before.

Now, remember, we're in 2000. Before Jeffery Irons and Roger Owensby, Jr., I think there were six others leading up to this—with no explanation as to why! No type of framework for how we can look at these things, and how can we how can we arrest people without taking lives, without using such force on them. So the black community was tired. We didn't know how tired—but we got to know how tired. The City of Cincinnati called us and said, “Okay, you all, we need to know what we don't know and how to fix it.” We took the challenge. Lots of people participated in this work, because this is multi-pronged. When you're talking about going against a culture of a system inside of a system that enables that system, you need a lot of help. Not just Iris Roley. A lot of people. I just carry it a lot heavier than most people do because death bothers me when it can be avoided. I had a cousin

killed by University of Cincinnati Police when I was in the middle of doing this work.

So what did we do? We went back to the community and we asked, “What do you want?” And because no one has ever really asked the Black community that question around policing, we really didn’t know. Then, as we were trying to organize, we had these two white guys that would just kind of hound us, they would come to our meetings. We met for years on Tuesday evenings—just come together and see what we could do. And these two white guys would come with these three big old white binders, and we would say, “Who are these white guys? What do they want?” They actually looked a little scary when I think about it—

**Ashton:** I can imagine.

**Iris:** You know? We were like, “Hey, hey, hey, who are you?” Come to find out one was Scott Greenwood, an attorney for the ACLU of Ohio. The other guy is the dearest, smartest, most capable, badass attorney in the world, which is Al Gerhardstein.

**Ashton:** Much respect for that man.

**Iris:** Much respect. And so, Al came in with these three big binders. And we say, “No, white guy, we don’t want you, we’re looking for black attorneys!” This is real talk! Because we thought we needed the lens of color on our situation. We didn’t want to do the same thing. We wanted something different and we wanted to ensure something different, so that meant seeing things how we saw it. Whoever was looking, needed to see it from our lens. But Al and Scott did. They got it. Al understood it. And they understood that it was going to take the law to change the law, to sustain the law and its change.

So, the Cincinnati Black United Front took a vote to say we’re going to work with these cats, but we need to find a Black attorney. Then we reached out to Ken Lawson, who was the legal eagle in Cincinnati. They call him “The Law Dog”—hardest working Black attorney, another badass attorney, one of the baddest, smartest brothers, who like ourselves, you know, was what you would call a fighter. And Ken was—is—amazing. Because Ken, like those of us who are out here, put all the weight on his shoulders. And it almost cost him his life.

Once we built our dream team of attorneys, they had a plan. They said we need to take this into court. And not in municipal court, not in the local courts,

but we need to go to federal court. We were organizing before the tragic murder of Timothy Thomas. And I want to be clear about that.

**Ashton:** Okay.

**Iris:** We had a design in place. We knew exactly what we wanted to do. We didn't know how it was going to go, because it was after Jeffery Irons and Roger Owensby. Then we had Timothy Thomas. And I remember that day so vividly. I was on my way to work. I worked for GE in consumer finance. I was a billing audit manager and had a very nice career. I was driving to Mason, and I got a call from Jelena Friarson, who was then chief of staff for the Cincinnati Black United Front. She said somebody else has been murdered. I was at the door of GE Consumer Finance in Mason, and I walked in and my boss was there, and I said, "I gotta go." And he said, "I already know; I heard."

So we all emerged in the area where Timothy Thomas was murdered on 12th Street. We called our attorneys, because the news was saying there were no witnesses, nobody saw anything, and the police were justified in the murder of Timothy Thomas. The nineteen-year-old kid who only had traffic violations. We knew that that couldn't be possible because of how close the area was—how close the housing was. That just can't be possible. So we started to do our own investigation. Most people don't even know this. We found witnesses, and we called our attorneys. At that time this church, New Prospect Baptist Church, sat at the corner of Elm and Findlay, at 1829 Elm Street. We were gathering as much information as we could, from as many people as possible. We took them into the church and called our attorneys and said, "We need something to happen."

And the story's not being told correctly. While we were working, trying to figure out exactly what had happened, the city, you could feel it, you could just feel the trauma and the brutal-ness of that. You could just feel that the city was—something was about to happen. And hopefully out of whatever had happened, something good would come out of it. And we could say, you know, you just didn't die just because some person who didn't give a shit about you that had a gun killed you. We wanted to change things to stop that. With their permission we kept going. We were actually in federal court organizing our class action when Timothy Thomas was murdered.

**Ashton:** If I could just interject—

**Iris:** Sure.

**Ashton:** I'm a huge believer in the way that the universe aligns things. I was about ten years old when Timothy Thomas was murdered. Officer Stephen Roach was the man that did it, and he was reassigned to the community that I grew up in, about two communities over in Evendale.

**Iris:** Their orchestrated firing so they could go get another job.

**Ashton:** Exactly. And this event was one of the major things that inspired me to come to law school in the first place.

**Iris:** Wow. Wow.

**Ashton:** And the thing that makes it even deeper—Ken Lawson—his mother was my godmother. Etta Lawson. Phenomenal woman. I firmly believe that it's not coincidence that I'm here talking with you here in New Prospect Baptist Church. And I can't say enough how powerful this moment is for me, how powerful the work that you're doing, how powerful the Collaborative Agreement is, and it runs it runs very deep, generationally—

**Iris:** I didn't know that—

**Ashton:** So it means a lot to me—I'm not saying this for the camera—I'm genuinely inspired by your story, by the story that surrounds all of this, because it's super important to me—it's super important to people like me—and I think the story needs to be told. So, apologies for interrupting.

**Iris:** No! Let me ask you this, because Stephen Roach did get a job in Evendale.

**Ashton:** Yes.

**Iris:** How did that make you feel, knowing that he was so close to where you were?

**Ashton:** Honestly, it was—I've encountered Stephen Roach a few times, so I know I'm sitting down right now; I'm six foot five. I'm a large black man. I've been profiled before, and having come across this man, knowing his history—I think I was driving past Walmart and I got stopped, I think it was for a broken taillight, and nothing came of it, no serious altercation, but—

**Iris:** You felt some way.

**Ashton:** I felt the fear of God. It was an incredibly humiliating experience because I couldn't do anything about it, and this man had all the power. And



at that point I knew that I needed to educate myself. I needed to make sure I could arm myself with the knowledge, so that if put in a situation like that again, I wouldn't have to be dependent upon anybody to save me, if you will, so I'm very familiar with the person that killed Timothy Thomas. And it pains me that he still has a job. It pains me that he didn't face adequate consequences in my mind. And this story seems to be very repetitive, which is part of the reason why I'm wearing this [Black Lives Matter] shirt depicting the many black lives lost since 2012 due to police violence. So, I would like to give you the floor and kind of continue along with the Collaborative—

**Iris:** But that is part of the floor. Because people have to understand that I remember the first time I saw Officer Caton.<sup>2</sup> It was years later. He was actually picking up former Chief Blackwell from one of the programs I run, which is unofficial juvenile court in Madisonville. Chief Blackwell had a bunch of computer equipment in his car that he was taking to another program. He just wanted to make sure it was safe, and he called for an officer. It was Caton, and I remember, literally, I jumped, just like that, because I read names, and I hadn't seen him ever in person, and it was my first time ever seeing him. We were standing this close. And I said, "Are you—?" And he said, "Yes, ma'am, I am," and he just kind of turned and walked away. Blackwell looked at me, and he said, "What? I don't understand." I explained to him who he was.

So that's why I ask. That is part of the floor. It's part of the story because the story continues, and it will continue if I don't hear—we don't hear—the world doesn't hear—from Black men about the continuation of trauma, and fear, and pain, and suffering. Because that is where ultimately, we need to be: Officers who kill unjustifiably, who take lives, should not be on any force. We don't see that. I just read where a young Black man was shot in the back running away from an officer, and that officer will not be indicted. This young man, eighteen years old, is paralyzed.

So there has to be the continuation of this work. And not just around police reform, but the correct justice reform. We need it across the board. And not just a feel-good, check-a-box, or for campaign promises—but to save lives, to preserve human dignity, to not take away someone's self-worth and self-value, not to create criminals. Not to profile people as if we all are the same. We're not. It doesn't happen to them. So, it shouldn't happen to us. So, my floor is your floor. I have three sons that look like you and a husband. I used

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., *Three Cincinnati Police Officers Indicted, Acquitted in On-Duty Killings Since 2000*, WCPO (Jul. 29, 2015, 12:36 PM), <https://www.wcpo.com/news/local-news/hamilton-county/cincinnati/three-cincinnati-officers-indicted-acquitted-in-police-killings-since-2000>.

to have a dog, but it was too much testosterone in my house—it was a male dog—he had to go.

**Ashton:** Yeah, I understand [laughs]. Let's transition the conversation a little bit to the work that you've been doing collaboratively with Dr. Brian Calfano, a professor in the University of Cincinnati Political Science department. As the Editor-in-Chief of *The Freedom Center Journal*, I've had the pleasure of reading some of his work along with the work of many of the different writers in this volume, *Identity Crisis*. We're very excited about the volume, and part of the rationale for this interview is to speak a little about Dr. Calfano's work, your role in crafting the survey questions, things that he's done to reach out to the community, and get some perspective from an empirical standpoint.

**Iris:** Inside of the Collaborative Agreement, part of what we've done is change policy, procedure, and guidelines. What we did when we went back and we asked the community, "How do you want to be policed? What does that look like?" We took all that, turned it into training, took the training, turned it into policies and procedures, codified some of the things like the Citizens Complaint Authority, contact cards—some of these things are really laws that the Cincinnati Police Department are supposed to be following. And through all of this work, we've never left the table. We've been at the table because the biggest part of the Collaborative Agreement is that it puts the community smack dab in the design and implementation of what public safety looks like. That means using the SARA [Scanning, Analysis, Response, and Assessment] model, using problem solving, laser focused, data driven, making sure you're talking to people, making sure that you understand who people are, where they are, making sure that you understand the intersections of bad housing, bad education, not having jobs—all of these things that really do intersect with people and intersect with crime and blight in the community. And allowing the community to determine what it is that's wrong in their community. So, that's the foundation of the Collaborative Agreement—not leaving out the use of force, and not leaving out how officers are trained and their mental health as well.

So, when we did our stakeholder groups, we invited the police—I don't know if you knew this—we invited the FOP [Fraternal Order of Police] to sit at the table with us during the process. We said, "Hey, come." We knew it was going to be a fight. So, let's get the fight started early [laughs]. So, we invited them into the room. We invited their families to talk about what it is to be part of a peace officer's family. What does that look like for them? We asked three questions. Believe it or not, Ashton—and I'll find this grid and show it to you—out of 3,500 people, eight stakeholder groups, we all said almost the same thing. Almost all, whether it was the LGBTQIA community, non-profit,

for-profit, business, police and their families, Black people, other minorities, we all said almost the same thing. So somewhere in there, we do believe in fairness. It's just pulling it out, putting it into policy, and holding people accountable, which is a whole 'nother thing.

Fast forward to where we are today. We knew that inside of the Collaborative Agreement, at some point we needed to stop and measure what we were doing. We had been asking the city to look at what it had been doing—how are we doing? Before we got to Brian, we needed to get to Dr. John Eck. He is a professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Cincinnati and was one of the crafters of Community Problem-Oriented Policing. I kept saying to Dr. Eck, who we worked closely with, “We’re not getting this right. The community is being left out of the training and I don’t think the police understand it very well, because they really don’t like to be told what to do.” But they signed the agreement—they said they were going to do it. We knew that there was some work that needed to be looked at, and we needed to figure out how to make this better.

So we did an audit, four years before you heard the word “refresh.” I’m going to be honest with you. We had been asking for an audit of our work. The community had been asking for it, through our attorneys. The politicians weren’t listening. They were saying, “Oh, we’re doing well, it’s going okay,” because people like to say that. But people don’t like to actually pull the onion back to see, is it actually okay? We still had underlying issues. People were still very upset because pain doesn’t go away quickly. You just can’t kill people and think, “Oh, well, people put some policies in place, and the African American community—because we’ve been the overseer, and we’ve been beating and brutalizing them for decades, they’ll forgive us.” And you notice that word that starts with the *T* that people automatically believe that you’re supposed to have, which is trust. It doesn’t work like that in reality.

So a politician decided he’s going to run for something, and says “I’m listening to her because she’s been carrying this work and they’ve been pushing for equity in policing and fairness and transparency, so I’m going to take that on.” Then you start to hear the word “refresh.” It was really just a campaign speech—just to make you feel good—because it’s a lot of work. Well, I took it seriously. And I still take it seriously.

So, what is the “refresh”? We all agreed that we would bring back Saul Green, the monitor of the Collaborative Agreement, and his team. Saul Green was our third monitor, and the longest-serving monitor that we had. Because you have to monitor the parties—four parties, remember: Black United Front, ACLU, the City, and the FOP. You have to monitor who’s doing what. Are they all beginning to do the work? So that we will see the fruit of the labor

later on. The monitoring team was set up through the federal court to monitor our progress—if we were working collaboratively together. Are Ashton and Iris saying the same thing? Do we want this policy to be in place? How are we agreeing? What does that look like? So we had a monitor team, we had RAND in town, we had all these people in town, and everybody's doing stuff. But we knew that once the agreement was signed in 2002—and it took us eighteen months to agree to all that—that at some point we needed to go back and monitor.

Well, as you're working and living and building and fighting and scratching for equity and transparency and fairness in your policing, years go by. In 2008, we developed the Cincinnati Plan, inside [federal district] Judge [Susan] Dlott's room. It is a document of the court. We all signed on as parties to the agreement that this is how we would carry the work forward. Most importantly, that we all would continue to work together.

Now, fast forward to 2011. We've got this document that tells us how we're going to do the work, the Cincinnati plan that we created inside of Judge Susan J. Dlott's room. After years of working on this, we say, "We need an audit." A politician says that we're going to do this "refresh" thing. We called in Saul Green. The City spent \$350,000 to audit our work. The City puts up the money, hires Saul Green's team, they come in and assess three areas: bias-free policing, mutual accountability, and Community Problem-Oriented Policing. Those three buckets. Now, why are those three buckets so critical?

Bias-free policing, what is that? How do police treat you? Why do they treat you like that? What are they using? Are they properly using the CA process to assess, to monitor, to scan to see who's doing what in what community? What are we looking at? Are they arresting more African Americans than non-African Americans? Adults and juveniles? What is actually happening?

Mutual accountability. Is community involved in the design of what strategies are about to be deployed in their communities? How are they doing that? How are communities and police working together? And then the third: Community Problem-Oriented Policing. Is everyone using this process? We know it's effective, that it's a way we can measure our work. Are we all using that? Those were the three areas. I'm leaving some out. Training, risk management, data, juveniles. It's a lot.

So Saul Green and his team assessed us, gave us several reports. They were blistering. They were honest. They were brutal. But they were blistering. Out of that came how do we then communicate, and do the work that Saul Green and his team have laid out for us to do? We all get into a room and say, "We need to have conversations with the community." But the city has never done

that well. Neither have the police. They talk to you, but does community actually understand exactly what they're talking about? Do they know what CPOP means? Do they know what bias-free policing means? Mutual accountability? Do they know these terms? Do they know that when police come to their community council meetings and they're reading their STARS [Strategic & Tactical Analytics for Solutions] Report—do they know that the data are actually factual and true?

During the course of this work, Ashton, the Cincinnati Black United Front conducted three surveys. We wanted to know the community's knowledge back in 2005, the perception in 2009, and then what did they know moving into 2011. Community perception surveys weren't anything new for Cincinnati Black United Front. So when there was a suggestion by the monitoring team that we do that, I said, "I'll do it." The city didn't want me to do it. I said, "I'm going to do it." Because I needed to ensure for me and the people that I represent that their voices would be lifted up and heard.

We had paid RAND millions of dollars to come in here and survey us during this process. I can't find a black person that was ever surveyed by RAND. Nor has the city ever paid us a million dollars to do a survey, either. I knew that we needed to do it so that our voices would be heard loudly and clearly. I was looking around trying to find some help in getting this done, but you know I'm a dreamer, so I dream big. I wanted 50,000 responses, and I wanted this survey, and they're going, "Are you crazy?" I was like, "Yeah, I'm crazy!" But I need to hear from folk!

So, I contacted the Cincinnati Project. I think Dr. Jennifer Malat [Associate Dean for Social Sciences at the University of Cincinnati's College of Arts and Sciences] heard me speaking about my dream; she said, "Call me, and we'll help you." And we didn't really initially wrangle out what that survey would look like. It was too long, it was too wordy, I was saying too much. All of a sudden, she said, "I know who you need." Then Brian Calfano texted me. And his first text to me was, "Hey chief, what do you want to say in this survey?" When you approach me like that, I already know you're down [laughs], because you're not, one, intimidated; two, you know what you're talking about; three, you know you need to listen to the people that are asking you to design something.

So, we sat down—Brian Calfano, myself, and Al Gerhardstein—and we designed this survey. I think it was nine questions. I wanted it to be driven by technology; I didn't want paper. I wanted it to be simple, because we don't have a lot of time to be doing these things, and I just wanted to get to the point. So, Brian took all of that—he took all of my thoughts, and all of what Al said—and created this beautiful survey. We also wanted it to be part of

the record of the “refresh,” and we wanted the community to lead it. So I hired a bunch of UC students, a bunch of Xavier students, a bunch of youth in the community, NAACP, ACSO, and we went to every major function in the summer of 2016 where black people were. We surveyed people far and wide. Now, remember, it’s online, so the surveys made it all across the city. I did some speaking at Anderson Township and a beautiful white lady raised her hand—she said, “Can I take the survey?” I said, “All of you all can take the survey!” Gave ’em the link and everybody took the survey.

When we get done with the survey there were more non-African Americans that took the survey than African Americans who took the survey, believe it or not. We almost matched the census in the city of Cincinnati. We got some very rich data, and Brian was extremely masterful in creating that survey for us and then lifting out what we needed to see and hear. Our survey was far better than the other two surveys. We had over 1,500 participants.

The police did their own survey, which was on SurveyMonkey, and I think about 200 of them took it. I would walk around asking, “So did you take the survey?” They would say, “What survey?” “You know you got a survey? Let your voice be heard.” I got some feedback from officers that were afraid to take the survey. They were afraid that if they spoke truth—their truth—that they could be identified in the demographics, like how many years have you been on, which district do you work in, so they didn’t do it. I’ve often saddened by that. We’ve not been able to create a safe enough space for people who are on the job to speak honestly about how they believe their job can be done differently, and/or better and to speak their truth.

**Ashton:** So just to clarify, members of the police force were not included within the survey?

**Iris:** No, there were three surveys. There’s the community perception survey, another for people who worked in the justice arena, and one for police only. There were three surveys that were done simultaneously.

**Ashton:** Understood. I’d like to hear a little bit more about the Community Problem-Oriented Policing—CPOP. How has that been implemented, what role the community was able to play in getting this policy to go forward, and how did this program expand after we see federal oversight go away?

**Iris:** It's insane. People don’t understand how much work has gone in these eighteen years. Sometimes it feels like it’s been eighteen minutes, but it’s been eighteen years. I’m glad that you’re refreshing my young mind about what actually happened, because there’s so many moving parts to this thing. It’s so amazing. I met a lady who said that her family was represented inside

the agreement, because remember, inside of the Collaborative Agreement we didn't just change police, we settled fourteen lawsuits that had been outstanding. Michael Carpenter's was just one of the fourteen. People had been out there since the 1990s who couldn't get their voices heard around their loved ones. They were awarded monetary damages. I think it was the largest settlement in history back then. We settled those suits. We changed policies, procedures, and guidelines, and implemented Community Problem-Oriented Policing. We designed what is called the Community Police Partnering Center. It rests inside of the Urban League. That is where the theory and application of problem solving is supposed to be taught and housed.

CPOP, Community Problem-Oriented Policing, is not community policing. It is not policing on bikes and just waving at Ashton as you go down the street. It is actually using data and using SARA to define what the problem is in a very definite, laser-focused way. It is not the traditional type of policing, because it allows communities to see the problem as they see them, and the police to see the problems as the community sees them, and then design solutions together. That's what CPOP is. But it takes time to do that. It's a process. And oftentimes communities don't have that amount of time to give. Whereas if you're on your job and it's mandated that you learn that, you do that.

How can the community use it? And why is it important for them to use CPOP? Because everything isn't policeable. Every incident isn't policeable. There are things that communities can do without involving the police. And then there are some things that they need to have police involved in. But 80% of the things, no, the police really don't need to be leading the effort for change. A lot of it, whether it's lighting, or better street signs so that you don't have traffic accidents, or construction done properly, or if we have school systems that teach, or if we have equity in pay for all, or if investments in the communities mimic other communities—if it was fair, and just, right? If people who were empowered did this in a fair and balanced way, you would see a reduction in crime and blight. You would see a reduction of distrust. You would see a reduction of separate and unequal. That can be birthed out of doing the right thing. We're watching it happen right now with the new stadium downtown. We're all watching displacement happen.

So, that's what CPOP allows. But it allows community to really begin to see what the problems actually are so they can bring in the people who are actually responsible for that. So if there's bad lighting on your street, Ashton, would you call the police for that? Or would you all the people who manage the lights?

**Ashton:** I would call the people who manage the lights.

**Iris:** Because you know if you've got dim lights or broken lights, it could invite somebody—I don't know who—to do something unsavory in your community. That's what CPOP does for you. It helps you dig to the root causation of the issue and to help that system, that entity, that person. Everybody comes to the table—the pimp, the prostitute, the drug dealer, the drug user, the teacher, the business owner, the homeowner, the renter—everybody comes to the table to define what the problem is, collectively, together. Because just because Ashton says it's a problem doesn't mean that I'm going to agree with that problem. It might not be my problem. It might not be the problem. It might be a problem. That's what CPOP allows communities to do. It allows them to determine in their own brain, their own selves what the problems are, and then how are they going to fix it, and invite everybody else in.

**Ashton:** That's very powerful, Iris. I think oftentimes when we talk about police issues, sometimes it's an us-versus-them mentality. What you seem to be talking about is much more inclusive, and it incorporates not only respect for the police, but also all members of the community. You were just speaking about all these different types of people and how they play a significant role with then crafting some of these policies. I admire the efforts. Obviously we still have a long way to go.

**Iris:** Yes, sir, we do.

**Ashton:** However, we are making efforts to try to be collaborative and make sure we're including those voices that generally haven't been included.

**Iris:** Giving the people who actually pay the bill the ability to know that they really are the boss, and when you act in that manner you get a different result. We are the bosses. We get policing by way of our taxes. We pay for it. We just want equity, transparency—we want the same thing in Avondale that you get in Hyde Park. We want the same thing that's happening in East Walnut Hills to happen in Walnut Hills. We want the same type of system that they get. We want to be able to pick up the phone and say, "I need the police to come to so-and-so," in a reasonable amount of time if it warrants that. We don't want it to become an issue because we should call the police, even though sometimes we go, "I don't know if I should call the police or not because I might be the issue."

And we now see an inspiration from the largest office in the land for bad policing to occur. So, it is our duty—it is our job as citizens, as taxpayers, as the nation builders—to stand in the gaps and say, "Nah, dog, I need to make



sure that there's a better path for my grandchildren," because I have them now. I refuse to have my granddaughter, who you'll often see running around with me, fighting for the same thing that I'm fighting for. There has to be something in place that builds a better tomorrow for her, her children and then her grandchildren. At least a blueprint. But then there's a lot that goes into that. It requires some voting. It requires some conversations. It requires investment. It requires thinkers to be at the table. It requires a lot. And it requires people to be out of the way, not bringing their selfish selves to the table. It requires a conversation about racism, privilege, power, influence—all of these things play a role in how we live each and every day.

I'm just not afraid to have those conversations. I think I have more days in front of me than I do behind me—no, behind me than I do in front of me. I often think I'm going to live to 200, so in this short amount of time that I have left—and I don't know when that is—it is my duty to fight as hard as I can to eradicate those isms, the abilities for inequities to occur, and the continuation of the beat-down and the destruction of my people. That's who I am. I didn't even mention that I'm married to the most wonderful, smartest Black man in the whole wide world, Mr. Jesse Roley, and I do have three beautiful sons, and five grandchildren that are looking at me every day seeing what grandma does and it's amazing because I looked at my grandmother and I watched her.

**Ashton:** That's an inspiration.

**Iris:** That's a legacy.

**Ashton:** Absolutely. I think I'd be remiss if I didn't include in this conversation some of the things that occurred in 2015. There is an article by Professor Sean Mangan in this volume of *The Freedom Center Journal* that documented many of the things that were occurring in 2015, one of which is the killing of Samuel DuBose. That was a catalyst for many of the things that we've already discussed, particularly within the University of Cincinnati community, and in the Cincinnati community at large. In conjunction with that event, that terrible tragedy, there were several different police killings that occurred all across the country. We saw in places like Baltimore, we saw in places like Charlotte, and Ferguson, Missouri—civil unrest is what we'll call it—

**Iris:** Thank you.

**Ashton:** Cincinnati had a very similar moment back in the early part of the millennium. From your perspective, why do you think something like Ferguson was catalyzed by something like police violence within the

community when we've spoken about all these societal ills and isms that exist, and all of these economic inequities that exist that have oppressed people for so long? Is the catalyst for something like a Ferguson moment, or a Baltimore moment, or a Charlotte moment, or a 2001 Cincinnati moment, when police violence goes down? I guess this is a two-part question in that I want to know, why does this moment happen? And is there a danger that something like this could happen to Cincinnati again if we don't get our act together? Because, clearly, we're working to develop better police relationships with the community. However, the mere fact that these things are happening as recently as a year or two ago means that we're not where we need to be—

**Iris:** As human beings.

**Ashton:** Correct. As a young person who is trying to prevent violence and trying to raise consciousness to a certain degree, I'd like to know how can we correct some of these economic ills and how do we correct that behavior—let me pause; it's not correction of behavior, it's a response to many of the things that have gone down, and then come to a head.

**Iris:** Well, let's start here. America was built on what?

**Ashton:** Slavery.

**Iris:** And violence. And enslavement was extremely violent. Extremely violent. We've yet to acknowledge enslavement in America. So, one, we won't even acknowledge wrongs, to even begin to see the wrong, to deal with if you're built on violence. Violence is, my God, it is part of the fabric of America. Violence, sex, all the things that we need to tone down, are dialed up and celebrated. So, you have violence—part of your fabric—part of that fabric—and enslavement is grafted in you and me as not human. No value. Who cares? I had a politician come into my business within the last couple of years and say to me, "I was sitting with some white folk in the suburbs talking about representation of African Americans, and they said to me, 'Do they pay taxes? They don't deserve representation.'" Ashton, in this room, Reverend Lynch and I sat and talked to about forty-five rabbis. They were here in the city for a conference of Jewish folks and they started talking to us about why African Americans should get reparations. They used scripture, things that they had learned, and it was a very rich dialogue. But not about how they would help, and how we should acknowledge why reparations should happen. After that, they called me to come to this room because they wanted to hear about the Collaborative. But I said, "No, no, no, we still need to talk about reparations." Because really we didn't want to sue the police.

We wanted to sue capitalism and racism. But there was no precedent for that, so Al couldn't figure that one out. You heard him talk about it, right?

**Ashton:** Yeah.

**Iris:** So that's who we really wanted to sue. Because we knew if the playing field was equal, we would see less of what you and I know happens in our communities. Why the gulfs are so wide. Why the divide is so huge, that every day it gets wider and wider and you get less and less people caring about people that they should care about. So we have violence as part of the fabric, we have enslavement, we have the devaluing, the whole system of not valuing Black people and/or African Americans, because that's how our class reads inside of the Collaborative Agreement. African Americans and/or Black people who are perceived as such, who live and walk on the streets and thoroughfares within the City of Cincinnati and/or Covington and who come into contact with Cincinnati Police and/or their agents. I still read it. I have to.

But those things that we won't even go back and acknowledge. We've never really, really acknowledged any wrong with the police, and if you read the agreement, you will see inside of it that there is no blame. We had to print that we do not blame them so we could some work done. You acknowledge the wrong, you just can't say it. Why? Why is that so hard? I believe that if you never ever do that from the beginning, you will still have the continuation. That's why we put our hopes and dreams in young folk and say, "Y'all push it a little further. Push it a little further. Push it a little further." I keep bringing up Miss Mary Page because she's ninety-nine.<sup>3</sup> She's lived ninety-nine years and when she cried the other day, it sent me over the edge. I couldn't believe. And I was thinking to myself, "What in the holy fuck is this?" How do you live ninety-nine years and you can't live peacefully, you can't live to enjoy your life, the rest of your days, you just can't live without worrying about where you're going to live, being displaced, because somebody wants to kick a damn ball. There will always be the continuation until somebody interrupts it.

When the forty-five rabbis wanted to hear about the Collaborative, I said, "No, I want to hear about the white man revolution." Because I need to see it. Because I can't—we can't—fix racism. That's theirs. They created it, they deployed it, they participate in it, they have to fix it. So that was my challenge

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<sup>3</sup> See Sharon Coolidge, *A 99-Year-Old Woman has to Move out of an FC Cincinnati-Owned Building, Prompting Scrutiny About Displacement*, CINCINNATI ENQUIRER (Apr. 8, 2019, 9:09 PM), <https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/politics/2019/04/08/fc-cincinnati-stadium-displacement-west-end-neighborhood/3405892002/>.

to them. I said, "I'm looking for the white rabbi, Jewish revolution." Somebody's got to stand up for right. Somebody's got to stand up for people. Somebody outside of us, you know, to change other people.

Because we still have a long way to go in Cincinnati. We've had murders that have been questionable since the Collaborative Agreement, which will always take something from it. We're always one incident away from going backwards. But at least we have something that we can hold them accountable to. We're also still trying to get our federal courts back to be people friendly, to assist in something like this. I'm far more worried now. I'm extremely worried because we have no friends at the federal level. Civil rights. We don't have any friends there. So, it concerns me that if there is another uprising—another Michael Brown or Timothy Thomas or Jeffery Owensby—who's going to come and help us? If everybody just simply got a gun, we're just going to all shoot at each other and shoot each other? Who's going to be left? What are we going to do? So you all are our hopes and dreams. That's why it's so important that you know what has happened, and what can happen, what can be done. I'm hopeful that you all will take this to the next level.

The three things that the Collaborative does do for us—it did allow us to look, real-time, at what was going on. It did allow us to look at other things that intersect with crime. What are those other things? And it gives us the ability to look forward. So I am so proud of the work that we did in 2001. I'm so proud that we were so forward-thinking. I know sometimes people think, "She is just over the top with that thing." But I don't know what else to hold on to.

We have those things that are in place and that have been able to stay in place for such a long time. We talk about 1619, when the first ship with enslaved Africans hit Jamestown. We talk about the 400 years, and the 244 years of enslavement and then the 170 years of Jim Crow. I don't think any of it has actually gone away. We still have some Black Laws on the books, even in Hamilton County and Cincinnati. Then we have the way people behave toward Black people and poor people and brown people. And are able to get away with it. It often worries me that because we have such a global lens now, we can see everything—because every day my inbox is filled with another negative, bad, police murder interaction. So in one way I know what's happening, but the other way I start to feel like, are we doing the right thing?

People feel that way, and when you talk to them about the Collaborative Agreement, they say it's not going to do anything. And I say, well you know at one time we weren't able to talk either. So wherever there is a door we

need to walk in and open it up and build. And work with people who have like minds and who want to see you live and breathe and want to see yours do the same thing. Your children. Your family. Because we have those things still there that folk who have participated and who have crafted have to fix. That's not ours. I'm not in that game. I got way too much other stuff to do. But I'm challenging those who have the power to take care of those isms.

Police are told what to do. You know that. They're told what to do. Even the best officers that want to do things in the right way. They tell me all the time, "I want to, but I'm told to do this." So there's that duality, do I do my job, do I bump my job, how will I be labeled on my job? I've met some cool white officers. I've been on the protest line and I've had white officers say, "Mrs. Roley"—and shake my hand—"Thank you for that work; we love this agreement. This has allowed the police department to do a lot of things, get grants, be recognized, get training, have folks called in to help." But then you have that very hard, entrenched culture it just doesn't want to let go of power and control. That's the ism! That's when we see the patterns of very bad practices. Until we have powerful people challenge those that are in the way, and holding on to very bad behavior and very bad thoughts, and they need to go home—that's what we said to the rabbis, you need to go back, to the people. There was not one Black Jewish person in this room. In the second decade of the twenty-first century. Even within our religious rooms we've still got a lot of work to do. In our beliefs. Where we pray. But we have things in common. Violence is hitting all of us. Hate is rising up in unusual places. Hate is rising. We're now seeing churches being burned. We've seen three just recently! We've got to figure this out.

**Ashton:** I don't think it's enough to just be uncomfortable. I think beyond having conversations like these, I think we need to feel empowered, because I do sense that there is a tide changing. I don't think it's a coincidence that so many violent attacks have occurred because I believe that this resistance to change really comes from a place of fear. It comes from a place of envy. It comes from a place of hatred. And in order to stamp out hatred, you have to be persistent. So, I admire you. I'm inspired by you.

**Iris:** Thank you, sir.

**Ashton:** I am—I'm ready to continue fighting the good fight. I'm going to continue speaking my mind about issues that need to be spoken about. I'm going to continue to have conversations like these. I'm going to continue to push people in their way of thinking. Because we can't make any permanent changes until we adopt a mentality that recognizes the past and recognizes some of the trauma that is still being carried forward into this generation—my generation. Only then can we attempt to fix it. Because I'm saddened by

the people that are on this [Black Lives Matter] shirt. By the people that have lost their lives. By the families that have been affected by it. It sticks with you, but you can't stay down. You have to keep fighting.

**Iris:** You know, I just saw the Sandra Bland story. We showed it here a couple months ago. I didn't want to see it because I'd read about it. I didn't need to see it. But I did need to see it.

**Ashton:** Right.

**Iris:** And I needed to be able to hear her in her own words. She was so freaking phenomenal. So inspirational. She was doing the work! She was talking to people; she was doing the work. She understood.

**Ashton:** Right.

**Iris:** She understood. Something I was going to say to you about this particular work is that for us—for the Cincinnati Black United Front—it was about the work, but it was also bigger than that. It was to empower people to stand up. To see it. And it's amazing, because now when I see all my childhood friends from school, they say, "You've been the same person all your life." I didn't think of it like that. Then when I see my husband's childhood friends, they tell me all the time, "You two are just alike." I often tell people 50% of what I say is pillow talk. I'm just blessed that we do own our own business, and that I'm able to step away. It's not always a good step away, to step away from your business, because I need to be there. We've lost—we've sacrificed a lot in this process.

That is the other side of the story that people don't know. The sacrifice of being on the front lines is tremendous. You die. Those five deaths. I think John Henry Clark talks about it. The religious death. The psychological death. The financial death. Your community death. And then your political death. Some days I think that people think I'm not human. I've had people roll up and say the damndest things to me, Black and white. "Who are you, what are you, who do you believe that you are that you can say the things that you say?" Now, I'm only reacting to a situation. I wouldn't have to say it if folk didn't do dumb stuff. The wrong stuff. This is a reaction to an action. But you laid it out. How do we change that? And this spiritual warfare that we're in is going to—I would love to see how it ends. I don't know if I will live that long, but I am so hopeful because of the young folk that I see rising up, the thoughts that they have, and the questions that they ask. How they question things. Because trying to make abnormal normal is hard. It's hard. When the round thing doesn't fit in the hole, it's square and you're trying to

force it, you know that this isn't right. We're trying to fit somewhere we know isn't right.

I am so ashamed of how children have to live today—how Black children have to live today. They're so fearful of the police. They're fearful, fearful, fearful. They hear gunshots, fearful. Not having good food to eat. Not being able to go to a grocery store. Not being able to go into a school system that is conducive to learning without seeing police. In this space where we are, we're surrounded by at least four police municipalities. The Cincinnati Police Department, Springfield Township right down here, Reading, Norwood, Golf Manor—

**Ashton:** State troopers were outside when we came in.

**Iris:** And then the OSHP [Ohio State Highway Patrol]. Those entities don't operate under the Collaborative Agreement. It's only CPD. All of that makes me afraid now because we're in such a police state. But we're hopeful, I'm hopeful.

**Ashton:** We have no option but to be hopeful. You've got to keep faith. That's the only way we're going to be able to get through this.

**Iris:** Yes sir.

**Ashton:** Prior to coming to law school, I taught middle school.

**Iris:** Locally?

**Ashton:** In Dayton, Ohio.

**Iris:** Where'd you teach?

**Ashton:** I taught at Dayton Leadership Academy. That's on the west side of Dayton. It informed a lot of my perspective about why these issues matter so much. Because like you said, kids are growing up in fear. They're not growing up with the freedom that was supposed to have been promised to them by their birth in this nation.

**Iris:** Can't they just go outside and dream?

**Ashton:** Exactly. So it's incumbent upon us—when I say, “us,” I'm speaking about yourself, a community leader, and myself, an aspiring community leader—it's incumbent upon us to ensure that they feel safe in their space, that they can claim their space, that they can own their space, and that they

can make this place a better place than it was when they got here. We have no option but to keep the faith, because if we don't, it'll be tragic for the kids that were sitting in my classroom.

**Iris:** Absolutely. I thank you for your service. I thank you for your disposition, for who you are. I thank the universe for producing you, along with your parents. I know that you and those who think like you and who want to take this walk, this journey—I'm going to order that the universe protects you in a way that is so significant that you don't even feel the negativity that will come because you want to change things. That is the order.

**Ashton:** Thank you

**Iris:** You're welcome.

**Ashton:** Thank you so much.

**Iris:** Thank you, sir.