

Gabrielle Battle: An Interview by Bri'Yon Watts
 Conducted on November 17, 2021 via Zoom

Gabrielle Battle is an African-American woman and Oakland, California native youth activist. She is a Duke University class of 2023 student majoring in Public Policy. Growing up in the origins of the Black Panther Party has heavily influenced her as an activist and organizer to advocate for marginalized communities that reflect her own intersection identities as well as those different than hers, showcasing true solidarity work.

BRI'YON WATTS (00:03)

Ok, so hello, Gabby. First I want to start off by asking you, How are you doing today?

GABRIELLE BATTLE (00:09)

I'm doing well. Thanks so much for asking. I'm excited for this semester to wrap down. It's been a hectic one, but I'm good. How about you?

WATTS (00:19)

I'm doing good. I'm really excited for this interview, to learn more about the work that you do and yeah. So, ok, so I'm really excited to start. So I guess I can go into my first question, which is, when did your desire to be an activist start and kind of what stimulated your activism?

BATTLE (00:44)

Yeah, so I think a lot of that came from the way that I was raised, and where I'm from. So I'm from Oakland, California and everybody will tell you, I talk about it all the time. It's just a huge part of my identity. And so growing up kind of in the legacy of the Black Panthers, has always been a really big deal for me. Since I was very, very young I've seen people protesting for things they thought were unfair out in the streets, were very much about unity in the community. I mean people in Oakland have just always been involved and are always out there having a voice told. So just that was the context of my life, I saw that growing up. And I grew up in a feeling that made sure that I was very aware about my blackness. And it was very explicit. So like, I would be in the second grade at Black Panther museum exhibits, anytime like a movie came out about anything related to black people, even if it was like 12 Years a Slave, my mom was like you will be in that theater, you will watch from start to finish, I don't want to hear any ands ifs, buts. You know, my mother, my grandmother, my great grandmother, my whole family just made me very, very aware of my blackness, and that it was a strength that it was something to be proud of, and just to have so much love for my identity that I should always speak out against injustice. And so just, that's the way that I was raised. And so that just kind of came through in the way that I interacted with the world. And I think the first time that I can remember, doing anything activist related, it was in the third grade, actually. And it's really corny. But I think it just speaks to how I was raised and how I became the person I am today in my activist career. But when I was in third

grade, in my elementary school, we had this rule that after third through fifth grade, you can't play on the play structure anymore, because you were too big, and only kindergarten through second grade can play on the play structure. And I thought that was unfair. I was like, who are you to tell me that we can't...what? Like we all go to school here. Why can we all play on the play structure? So I decided to gather all of the children in my school, and I wrote a petition because at that school, I learned that if you write a petition and you get enough people to sign it, things can be changed. So I wrote a petition. I was like we students at the academy elementary school, do not think this is fair. We believe that we should be able to play on the play structure and I walked around lunch and had people sign it. And I walked into the director of my school's office after school and I was like here are all the students, we think it is unfair that we can't play on the play structure. And she actually changed the rule. So Mondays and Wednesdays, the kindergarten through second grade got to play. And on Tuesdays and Thursdays we got to play and on Fridays it would revolve. And so that's a very silly example. I've always been very, very passionate about using my voice against things that are unjust. For me, for the most part has been dealing with black people and black girls specifically. But that's just kind of a testament to how...the context of Oakland and my family, and the legacy that I grew up in, really shaped me to be super outspoken about things that I care about.

WATTS (03:53)

I love that. Oh my gosh, I love that.

BATTLE (03:55)

Thank you.

WATTS (03:55)

I don't think the example that you gave was silly at all.

BATTLE (03:59)

Thank you.

WATTS (03:59)

Because even in your youth, that was like a moment where you use the voice, like you said, as a vessel of activism, I think that's really cool.

BATTLE (04:08)

Thank you.

WATTS (04:09)

Yeah, no problem. Ok, so my next question would be, and you kind of touched on this, but I'll give you room to expound. For the record, can you elaborate on the kind of activism that you do?

BATTLE (04:23)

Yeah, so my activism has grown and changed a lot throughout my life. And I think it's because you know, a lot of our struggles as oppressed people are interconnected and all of the systems that we interact with are also interconnected. So though I have my areas of interest, I've touched on a lot of different things now as I grow in my career, because you see, how can you address health care when you know the school systems are not what they should be right? It all connects. But I'm very deeply passionate about advocating for black people specifically, I'm really passionate about black girls and black girlhood because I think that that is something that often goes ignored. How a lot of systems compound to create negative experiences for black girls in our country. And I particularly focus on the incarceration system and the justice system. And I do that for all black people but like I said, whenever I have the opportunity to, have room to do stuff with black girls, I do it. And I have in my activist career, I've started to focus a lot on policy. I'm a public policy major here at Duke, and research, because I love on the ground organizing and that's what I did for a long time. But now as I've changed my focus, I think that policy and research are really powerful vessels to continue the work, so I try to use those as bridge points between on the ground efforts and listening to communities and really tangible change. Yeah.

WATTS (05:48)

Wow, I love that. Especially you bringing up the point of how everything is connected and like that, you have to be able to work in a different kind of facets of activism, in order to see what you want to see, be accomplished. So I really, really appreciate that.

BATTLE (06:07)

Thank you.

WATTS (06:07)

Of course, ok. Ok, so could you talk a little bit about what the Just Us Initiative is?

BATTLE (06:15)

Yeah. Ok. So Just Us Initiative is like my child. Oh my gosh. So what it is, is a lot of blood, sweat and tears. But yes, ok. So the Just Us Initiative is an online platform that was created for black girls, by black girls to provide them with the resources so they can feel liberated and free in the world, and to know that there's someone who cares and loves about them enough to be able to create a platform for them to feel safe, heard, accepted, and loved. And so how this started was actually COVID. I was supposed to spend my summer in Germany, in Turkey, doing

immigration law, and COVID came and that didn't happen. And so at the time, I was doing a lot of work with the Kenan Institute for Ethics.¹ Actually, because I started with my FOCUS there so I was doing a lot of research for them and working with their refugee community.² And they were having a fellowship, called the ethics at home fellowship. And you could really just spend your summer working with a community that you cared about. I chose black girls. And so what I did is I created Just Us, young black woman's perspective on justice and equality and liberation, which was the research report. And I interviewed about 50 Black girls across the United States on their feelings on justice inequality and liberation, to understand what were the biggest...who are the biggest people in systems that were standing in the way of black girls feeling free and just in this world. And who were their biggest support systems in the spaces that made them feel advocated and cared for? And so I did this, and then I ended up doing an independent study and producing this 50 page research paper, did a lot of work. And then because of all the technicalities, I didn't have IRB approval, so I was like well, I can't submit it for publication.³ So I was fortunate enough to be able to present it at conferences and things like that, but I was like, I want to do something more because I've always been passionate, like I said, about combining research with action. So I reached out to the girls I interviewed, I was like hey, I want to make this move on this project and how can we build it up? And so I was like, I have a rough idea of doing something online just accessible for all girls, how can we get this done? And so I ended up building up a team of 10-12 black girls who I had previously interviewed, who were college aged girls and we built this huge website for black girls and so everything you see on our website from the content design to the website itself to every piece of everything that we've curated was written by a black girl or non-binary person and is representing those experiences and so not only do we shed light on like the harms we experienced, which is like the Letters to Campaign and the police brutality, that cis and trans Black girls face, but also like the joy of our experience and the love and like just I want girls to go on that page and feel like seen and heard and beautiful and so we have just resources on everything under the sun so that black girls know there's a hub for them of content that is supposed to reflect their experiences. So yeah.

WATTS (09:26)

Oh my gosh. That sounds really intense. I love it but it sounds so intense.

BATTLE (09:31)

It was. I mean it was like a six month process building that website and meeting every week. I mean, really building it from like, nothing like there was just an idea and I wanted to use the

¹ Kenan Institute for Ethics is one of Duke University's interdisciplinary institutes that focuses on ethical inquiry. Visit <https://kenan.ethics.duke.edu> for more details.

² FOCUS is a program for first year students to explore humanities, sciences, and social sciences in more detailed ways through refined clusters of focus with classes relating to specific aspects of these subjects. Visit <https://focus.duke.edu> for more details.

³ IRB is the Institutional Review Board which is a group that reviews biomedical research that involves humans for means of research..

stories that the girls had shared in their interviews to kind of guide us. Like what the girl said they want to see. Like what made them feel beautiful, what made them feel loved, what made them feel seen, and how do we put that on a website. And then I was like ok girls, let's make this shake. We split up girls, put them in different teams, and we just started working towards it and built it up and so I'm really proud of what we were able to accomplish with that.

WATTS (10:06)

Yeah it sounds really dope. I really love it and to know, all this effort was put in, like you said, by you and black women and non-binary individuals. I think that's really important. And it gives you a moment to...like in the title, to just focus on you all and have a space just for you all, which I think is very, very important.

BATTLE (10:31)

Thank you.

WATTS (10:33)

Ok, so I'll go to my next question. Ok, this is kind of shifting gears to something else but what was your goal with the Letter to Campaign? And what were you trying to accomplish with that?

BATTLE (10:48)

Yeah, ok. So a few things. So when I started this project, I built it up before the George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, before those cases caught a lot of traction. So it wasn't in the radar of a lot of people's perspectives. But when I carried out my interviews, those protests were the central thing going on that summer. And so it was in the backdrop of a lot of conversations that I had, even though I didn't intend it to be because that is life for black Americans. We don't intend for them to come up, but they do, because that's part of our experience being like conscious black people in this country. And so black girls said over and over again, we're losing our lives, too and nobody cares. And you can see with Breonna Taylor's case. Still, no one has been charged. And so people were like, nobody cares about our stories and our experiences. And nobody, I don't believe anybody will fight for us. And I heard that over and over again. I mean, imagine hearing 50 girls say that, almost everyone, no one's gonna fight for us. Nobody cared about us. If I died tomorrow, nobody would fight for me. And so the Letters to Campaign, I wanted to shed light on the stories of black cis and trans girls who lost their lives due to police brutality. And so I wanted to hold space for their stories and to share that we do care, we will listen to you, we will fight for you, and we love you. And so I asked girls at Duke, so these weren't even necessarily girls who I interviewed originally, but I asked them to write letters to a cis or trans black girl who they have something in common with, in some arena, whether they were from the same city, they have the same interest, you know, same gender identity, anything they could find, and write a letter to them and how their death affected them and made them feel and just held space for that. And so I don't know if you saw, but we ended up making a video for

it. We wrote the letters and published them, because we just want...to know that there are more stories that are told and so we invite people to continue to write letters and share stories and hold space for these people. But just for black girls to know there is...I mean we hope, that black girl's lives stop being lost, but we also want girls to know that there is someone who cares about you, there is a community that loves you and will always rally behind you. Yeah.

WATTS (13:05)

I think that's a...I know I keep saying this, but I feel like that's also really, really important because when we do have these conversations, black women and trans women, black trans women are often always overlooked in the movement, and you'll often find that black women and black trans women are always at the forefront fighting for the issues for all black people. And we don't really pay attention to how that can take an effect on black women's mental health and all those types of things. So I feel like that's really important. And with that, I want to ask, what do you think was the hardest part of that, of the Letter to Campaign or trying to get it together?

BATTLE (13:52)

Not mellowing in simply just the pain and the hurt. We shot all of those videos on the same day. So I was just sitting and just hearing these powerful letters, but I mean, these tragic letters. So I wrote to Breonna Taylor, because that was a catalyst for a lot of conversation and also that was the most well known story so I wanted to push people to get stories that weren't told. But I read my Breonna Taylor letter first and then hearing all the other girls speak and just and just feeling the pain and just sitting in the pain and trying to understand how do we hold space for it, but not let it consume us? And that's hard, you know, that's a really hard thing to do. And I kept going back to: what if I do all this and people still don't care? And that was something that I struggled with, even after the campaign was done. So the summer when George Floyd died, I read this poem, not this poem, this speech online. And it got like 5,000 views and I was private and everything so it got all these views, and then not like blew up online, but it was like circulating a lot online. When I talked about the Breonna Taylor stuff it was silent. And I really had to come to terms with...it's the same platform, the same traction is still here, but people still don't care, and it was just holding that you can only do so much to make people care. And when it's not popular anymore, it doesn't resonate with people's stories, that's all you can do. And so I think that was hard, holding the pain working towards it, and then seeing wow, and the energy still isn't here in the same degree, even though I did all I could do.

WATTS (15:45)

Yeah. And I feel like there's a conversation to be had about that. About solidarity and not just supporting your own people and people that look like you always. We're obviously going to be drawn to that as our first, our initial like movement to support, but it is, it's kind of sad to see that

we don't get that same support, or that black women don't get that same support, when it comes to them needing the most help, or them needing to be centralized in a conversation.

BATTLE (16:22)

And I will also...I agree, I totally agree with that. And I'll add one more thing too, is that...so when I was doing my interviews...sorry, it's a winter and my lips are chapped. And I'm like oh my gosh, can't go out like this.

(BATTLE goes to grab her lip balm)

So when I was doing those interviews, and I asked what do you think is the largest threat to black girls achieving justice in the US? And the overwhelming answer was black men. And I was like well wait, wait. I mean let's have a conversation about this. Because it was something within our own community. I thought people would say the white man, the justice system, not black men. And so what I ended up doing was interviewing a ton of black guys and saying ok this is what black girls are saying, where's the disconnect? What do you see is happening on your side that is making black girls feel like this? And so I did those interviews, and it was a portion of my paper, but what I ended up doing towards the end, was having this really beautiful conversation with like 25 black guys and 25 black girls about what does a healing space look like? And it was really powerful and understanding how do we honestly and truly support each other and make each other feel safe, supported, and comforted, so that we can move into this road as one. And obviously, our struggles are going to be different because they just are, but how do we hold each other's experiences and move forward? And so I think that's kind of an example of...because I played around with different things I wanted to do. It wasn't always just the Just Us Initiative. I tried these healing circles and other things. I wanted to see what would best fit my goals. But I think that conversation was a really powerful moment and thing that how do we support each other as we move forward in this life?

WATTS (18:01)

Yeah, I love that. I think that's really beautiful. That it was...and correct me if I'm wrong, but the response that you got from the black men, to that was not very aggressive, trying to put the blame elsewhere, but kind of take part in and reflect on...well, what can we do, to better and change that? That's a real thing. It's a real conversation. So yeah, I do think that's important. Ok, so my next question would be, how do you suggest that people try to stand in solidarity with black women, because I know that that's a struggle?

BATTLE (18:41)

Yeah, that's a hard one and it's real. So there are a few things. So one, I think it's about holding space for black girls to to articulate their own stories and experiences and to amplify their voices. Not to speak for black girls, and to not force black girls to have to say something. To open the

room to listen, accept or not if they do, and then amplify what you can and I think that for example, when you're looking at like academia research that's something I've really pushed for whenever I've done work with black girls, even though I am a black girl, I'm like no let's interview black girls and see what they have to say. And then we we're focused on responses on what black girls say, point blank period. And so I just think things like that create room for black girls to feel really seen, heard, and appreciated. I think also it is about just holding black girls and everything that we experience. You know a lot of times, if you are black we share the racial aspect of our identity, if you are a female identifying person you share like your gender...I mean, different layers obviously intersect but I think a lot of times black girls feel so alone in this road and that the only people that have are themselves, and to just literally hold a black girl in like her fullness and in her girlhood. And similar with black boys, our childhoods are stripped from us at such a young age. I think to just see people and hold them and just understand them and listen to them just does so much. And then I think it's about assessing the black woman in your life and saying, how do I work to make you feel appreciated? I think that's something I asked a lot of the black men and boys that I interviewed, I was like oh how do you make these black girls feel appreciated or special. Because even if you might feel that way, if you're not showing that externally, and black girls are showing up to be at the frontlines for your struggle, like that makes us not feel supported. So I think that appreciation piece is really important and I just think it's about going just as hard. Like I remember, when Ma'Khia Bryant died the same day as George Floyd once again, it just didn't get that energy. And it was crazy, I was looking at people post this and they were just black girls. There was nobody else reposting. And I mean, eventually it caught on, but for a while there, no one else was saying anything. And that's why I think black girls just feel so alone in their experience. And so always amplify and go hard when you can in the space that you can for another group beside yourself. So yeah.

WATTS (21:22)

I love that. And I hope that every person who hears this or reads this eventually, that they take that into consideration. And they go past the surface level of what you just said, and really find ways that they can actually put that into their daily lives and everything like that, because I feel like that's really important. So yeah, ok, kind of shifting gears to I think something that you mentioned earlier. Did you mention working on like black people or like black women in the justice system or being incarcerated?

BATTLE (22:01)

Yeah, yes. So do you want me to talk about that or?

WATTS (22:07)

Yes please.

BATTLE (22:08)

Ok. So that's been a lot. So I'll tell you kind of my broad focus on black people in general. And then what I've been doing with black girls. So I have always been passionate about law. Always known I wanted to be a lawyer. I just think the law is a really powerful tool to affect change. And so I started working this divergent program called Centerforce Youth Court. I don't really think it exists anymore but I was in that program for six years. Like I literally started in the sixth grade, not six years, seven years. I started when I was in sixth grade and did it all the way until I started Duke. And basically, this was a divergent program for youth who committed misdemeanor crimes. And so instead of them being referred to juvie, they were referred to our court where you served as attorneys, bailiffs, clerks, and jurors, and recommended them to restorative justice practices rather than punitive sentencing. So we referred them to substance abuse classes, anger management, wise decision making classes, as well as doing community service and going back and repairing the harms done in their community. So I was literally the only like...it wasn't like young people. No, most people were like junior and seniors in high school. I was a little sixth grader defending a 17 year old, who beat his girlfriend. And I was like oh my gosh, like, what am I supposed to do here and so but anyways, you could do both prosecution and defense and I just had a love of defending people, and so I just started defending, defending, defending. Even though prosecution was easier, because they literally had agreed that they committed the crime. I just cared about people. And I was like I want to defend you. And I ended up working on the California Association of Youth Courts. And the Youth Advisory Board is the chair. So basically, there are these types of courts all across the state of California. And we come together every year for conferences and how we can go back and forth and make better practices and really affect change. And so I chaired that for a long time. And I really brought equity and discrimination and inclusion and those kind of conversations to the forefront of the work that we were having as a statewide task force. And so I just got really involved with rethinking incarceration, that way. So I did a lot of work there. And then even just like in sub projects, I was working on incarcerations, often, the thing we're trying to avoid was a common thread and a lot of the work that I did so like right now, I work for UCLA, and they're reimagining children rights law, and I am a juvenile justice specialist and the research that they're doing to advance like children's rights in the US. When I did work with Alliance for Girls and the experiences of black girls, it was about how do we make sure that girls aren't on the street? And it's easier for them to get caught up in the law and they're incarcerated. So incarceration was always this thing that we were bouncing back and forth between. What I've spent the last year of my life working on was this fellowship with the Gathering for Justice and so the Gathering for Justice was founded by Harry Belafonte in 2005, after he saw a young black girl, I think it was Florida, get arrested in class, and she was just a child. And so he wanted to create this nonprofit with a goal of ending child incarceration. So I'm one of their, juvenile justice fellows and so right now I'm working to...it's very long and complicated but essentially, what I'm doing is there's this law called SB-823 in California and so basically, they're closing down the state prisons for young people, and leaving it up to counties to figure out what should they do with their young people. And so I'm working with San Joaquin County to reimagine how they're going to interact with

their young people who commit crimes, specifically 707b offenses which are like the most egregious harms and rethinking how do we think about justice safety and fairness, in the new context of this California law. So I've been working on that right now. And with everything that was a special love of I think that black girls. But yeah, so that's kind of what I've been doing right now. And juvenile justice, it's a lot and a lot of projects that come and go, but that's where I spend a lot of my time and energy.

WATTS (26:21)

Oh my goodness. It's like, just listening to you talk gave me goosebumps for a moment.

BATTLE (26:28)

Thank you.

WATTS (26:28)

Just because the passion that you have for it, it's very apparent. I can clearly tell that you like our full force supporting these things that you're working on. And it's just really beautiful to hear.

BATTLE (26:46)

Thank you.

WATTS (26:48)

Of course, of course. Yeah. So it kind of prompted two questions for me. So one question is, in knowing that you're doing all these different things, and you're sending school and everything like that, how do you go about juggling all of that, and balancing everything that you do?

BATTLE (27:09)

Yes. I ask myself this all the time. That's my weak spot. I'm doing all this right now, and three jobs, taking new classes and studying for the LSAT. And so my mental health has been in the worst state, I think that it's ever been in this semester, particularly. And then with COVID, and taking care of my family, it's just a lot. And I haven't been the best at that. So I'll tell you my goals for how I try to juggle it and then what actually happens. So first, I think the way that I juggle it is I root everything in my faith now. Like moving forward, that's been really important for me, that's something I really connected with, during COVID. There's so many things you can't control in this world, whether it is life or death, whether it is the obstacles that are thrown at you, and the only thing you control is how you interact with them, there's just a lot that's up in the air. So I tell myself, that one, everything's happening for a reason. There's a lesson I'm supposed to be learning off of whatever is happening, and two, God is going to make away for me, somehow he will make a way out of no way. And that's just what I have to tell myself. And I believe that, and I'm just telling this to myself. I believe that and it roots me in everything that I do, because otherwise I just am not tethered to anything, I just fall apart. So that's one thing. The

other thing is just a love for my community. And that goes back to what I had in Oakland. And I love black people of all shapes, sizes, colors, whatever like that. But even just like people in general, one thing about being from Oakland, is we love that we're from Oakland. Regardless of whatever race you are, whatever, we are so proud of it and it's a shared identity and so I just have a love for community, however you build that just loving that and doing all the work because you care and you want the community to succeed and to thrive. So like mentally that grounds me a lot. The other thing that I have tried to do is like self care, little things. I used to think like self care is dumb, I don't need self care. Then I was like oh my gosh, if I don't do self care, I will have a breakdown and so I...even this year, I tried to do...like I have right up here you can't see it. This is my little self care box.

(BATTLE gestures upward to a box on a shelf above her, then moves the camera towards it)

So I have silly things like face masks. I have good snacks. I have body scrubs, little silly things like that, that I just try to do to take time for myself. I'm a very social person but I value my peace and being alone and that's something that as you get older and more mature I guess you come to terms with and so this year as things have gotten more intense with my work, finding peace and being alone with yourself and recharging from the work has been instrumental for me. Now how do I juggle it all? Honestly, this has been a year where I have fumbled, like usually I can make it all work. And this is the first year I've fumbled and let things drop and not done things as well as I wanted to, and signed up for too much because I thought I could do it all. And there have been times before where it all worked out, we're gonna see, we're gonna see how it works out, I'm not fully sure. But I think to juggle it all, it is to know what battles to pick, when to say no, to know you can't do it all, and you have to build a community that can do it all. Even with the Just Us Initiative, I was like I have the idea. I have the vision. I'm going to need some people to help me with this. I didn't know how to build a website, texted my best friend. I was like girl, you are so good at coding, build this website. She built the whole thing. I was telling her the vision, she was making it work. I don't know much about health, but I know black girls need to be educated on the importance of health. Boom, texted some pre med and pre health people from Howard Spellman, whatever. I said please help me with this. They got it done. You know what I'm saying, same thing with beauty. One girl in my fellowship was a skincare influencer and she's all about having affordable things for low income girls of color. I was like boom, put you on the team. It's about building a team around you that can help you also get your visions done, as well. And so I think that's really how you juggle it all. You have a strong team and a strong network that supports you, when you fall, and can help you get the work done, and then you know what to do and what to say no to. And then like I said, I tried to rope myself in all those other things, and hope it all works out. And if it doesn't, you know what I tried my best. And I say, you know what, you're just 20 years old. Figure it out. So yeah.

WATTS (31:40)

I feel like well no, I love that because number one I think it's really cool that you're able to have that humility and that vulnerability with knowing that I don't have it all, everything is not figured out to this second, and that's ok. And just you recognizing that but also acknowledging the ways that you and the work that you do, can kind of have that bridgework being done. So I think that's really important. I think that's really cool.

BATTLE (32:12)

Thank you.

WATTS (32:12)

Thank you for that. Ok, so the second question that I was prompted to ask earlier was, how do you suggest people who are interested in this type of work and this type of activism get started and find their way into it?

BATTLE (32:32)

Yeah. So, yes. So I think one thing is one door always leads to another. So when I was doing my internship for this fellowship, this fellowship was a pretty big deal for me. And I was doing my interview, and I was sitting there realizing, everything that I did in the past prepared me to be in the position that I was in that interview for the fellowship. And so I remember, we had a group interview. I was like what? But it was a group interview with the head of the organization, who led the Women's March and all that stuff, and they gave us a crisis. And they were like solve it. And I was like oh, no. But you realize everything that you've done, prepares you to be in a position to do that. And so the only thing holding you back is not starting. I think you just have to start somewhere because doors and opportunities open up. I think if you're on a campus like Duke, opportunities are all over the place, literally all over the place. And all you have to do is ask someone how can I work with you and get involved. So my freshman year, the Central Park Five who are now the Exonerated Five, two of the five, came to speak at Duke, and this was like my first week out, and I was like wow, I love it here. Like I'm a freshman, I'm loving it, I'm cheesing. And so I reached out, I'm like how can I work for the center. It was celebrating a new center that had just opened at Duke's law school. And so I reached out to some people. I was like here's my resume, I want to get involved, what can I do? And he was like you're hired. And I've been working there my whole time on Duke's campus. Doing stuff on the intersection of law and science and justice. And so it's like you have to put yourself out there and find things that interest you and excite and awaken a passion in you, and just do them. I think time is valuable and so you want to think...I think time's more valuable than money. So you have to think about where you want to invest your time, and what calls you. I really suggest people sit down and think like what calls you. What do you wake up and smile about and excites you? And what is your lane in that work? And even if you don't know, how can I figure it out? And I think it's always connecting with a person. It's about asking someone, how did you get started? What organization can you connect me to? What meeting can I sit in on? And you do that and it just opens up doors for you.

Something we say a lot in my fellowship is everybody has your own lane in the work and it's not the same lane, but everybody has one and you just have to find it and do it. I have...my friend is in film at USC, the one who built our website for the Just Us Initiative. And she does it because she wants to see more diverse representation of black people in film. Like, film doesn't have to be like an advocacy tool, but it is for her. I have other friends who...this guy isn't my friend, but I know him. He's like a big deal, back home. So not from the Bay, like everyone's in tech and Silicon Valley.⁴ And he used his coding skills to create an app that allows black people to report spaces that aren't safe due to police brutality and create a network so people know where to go and where not to go. And so it's just things like that, people using their skills, finding a lane, finding their passion, and combining them and connecting with people who can continue to make them interested. So I'd say it's about putting yourself out there, asking questions, and then getting in where you can't, and then also not being married to one singular version of what you should be doing. I have gotten into things that I'm like oh this is what I will do for the rest of my life. And then I'm in the fellowship...not the fellowship but I'm in the fellowship or the internship or the job for two weeks, and I'm like this is cool, I learned a lot, but this is not the route for me. For example, I know I cannot do nonprofit work. Nonprofits make the world go round, but that is so stressful. My heart could not take it. So it's about those opportunities I got working with nonprofits, priceless. And we were able to make very strong and effective change, but I wasn't married to that. I was flexible, and used that as a learning opportunity to prepare me for the things that I do now.

WATTS (36:35)

Oh my gosh, that was really good. Ok, I keep saying it but it's really useful, the way in which you structured that. Making sure that you're flexible, that you're kind of trying to get out there, and just find things that you think might be for you. Not thinking that what you want to do could...thinking that it may not be helpful or useful to activism, when like you mentioned in a couple of different cases, that it can be. You just have to find the right way to do it. So I think that's really, really helpful for people who are interested, but just don't really know how to get started with that. So yeah. Ok, so I guess I'll move on to my next question. Ok, can you describe what black liberation or I'll say, black liberation for black women looks like for you? Can you describe what those look like?

BATTLE (37:38)

That's a good question. That's a good question. That's an excellent question. It's something I asked myself a lot. I'm like what's the end goal here? Ok. I think...that's a tough one. I think black liberation for me is centered in love. And I think for black women, it is about knowing that they can show up as their authentic self, and will be and can love...I think black liberation for black women is being able to love their most authentic self, and to be able to show up in their most authentic self, every single day. And to have systems that aid and that love of themselves, if

⁴ "The Bay" refers to the San Francisco Bay Area and "the Tech" refers to surrounding areas of Silicon Valley.

that makes sense. I think obviously, every system that is put in place is designed to see black people, marginalized people, poor people, the LGBTQ community, it's set up to see people fail. And I think when we have systems that encourage love, instead of hate, and is rooted in being able to love the fullness of your identity, that's when we can be liberated, and we can be free. And I think it's to know that not necessarily that you were going to be loved by everybody else, but you'll be loved by those who want to love you. And so I think it's about, it's all rooted in love and having those systems, those programs, and those spaces, all being aligned with that. And that's why I go back to that time. That's why I love the Black Panthers so much because of their community programs like they were doing the dang thing in the Oakland Community. They had like 100 different programs. They were meeting every need. They were the newspaper, they were the school, they were testing for sickle cell, they were giving free breakfast, they were policing the police, they were walking old ladies to the bank so they wouldn't get robbed because Oakland is a little crazy. You know, I mean they were just centered in love of the black people and though systems couldn't change, their programs are centered in love, be your authentic self and we will love you back and give you everything you need. And so I think that is what we need. And when I say authentic self I'm saying specifically about standing in your Black womanhood and still having...still going just as hard in all of that as well. Does that make sense? I know, it's kind of all over the place.

WATTS (40:08)

No, that makes perfect sense. It makes perfect sense.

BATTLE (40:09)

And it's something I'm still thinking through too. So you might ask me, in a week, I might have a different answer for you. But as of right now, I think that's what my answer is.

WATTS (40:17)

I love that. And I think the best part about that, like you said, you're constantly thinking about it. Constantly, things that can change about it. Growing, I'll say, which is really important. I'm glad that you brought up the Black Panthers because I wanted to circle back to that for a moment. Do you have any...do you have like...what's your fondest memory of growing up in this central area of the Black Panthers, where that was kind of centralized?

BATTLE (40:50)

Oh my gosh, I don't even know I just I love, I love my hometown so much. I love it. I can say like, I run to Angela Davis, at the farmers market, just for funsies. I have seen Bobby Seale. I've seen Elaine Brown. I have just seen these people still alive and breathing. And walking around like it's nobody's—like I said, I saw this at the farmer's market by my house. I'm saying just to grow up in that legacy. It's just so there, it's so true, and it's just so tangible. And just to feel like you're a part of something, I think sometimes, as black people in this country, the systems are put

in place to make you feel like you're not a part of something. It's to make you lose hope. And to just feel like you are a part of this beautiful legacy, I mean it's untouched. I will also say too, I was really fortunate. So my great grandmother just died, when we were sent home because of COVID. I mean she didn't die because of COVID, but during that time, and she was 103. And so I was able to see my great grandmother, my grandmother, who's like 85/86, my mother and our saying is every generation has to do better than the last. And when you do better than the last, you pull the next generation up with you. And so I've been able to see, even though it's not specifically Oakland, I've been able to see how my family has worked through these systems and come out of these beautiful, strong black women. My family is very much a matriarchy. My grandma has eight sisters, and unfortunately my grandfather and great grandfather were dead before I was born. But I grew up in a black woman dominated environment. And though that's not, like I said, Oakland, just being in that space of being a part of also these women who were just badass. Like my grandmother decided she didn't want to be a housewife and she went back to school and went to UC Berkeley and became a social worker. And one of the toughest areas in one of the nearby cities in California, because she just loves people. She loved education, she loved writing, and she wanted to help black people, and she became a social worker, because that was her passion. My great grandmother did not know how to read or write, but she made it a mission that all 10 of her kids were going to go to college, and they did. And so it's just seeing that, they were also part of the Great Migration of black people. So like my family's from Arkansas, which is hilarious because I'm just such a California person, through and through. But my grandmother was born in Arkansas, and they ended up moving. Because one day, my grandfather went to the store and he was like sir, you didn't give me the correct change and he put a gun to his head and he was like, I gave you your correct change, you better leave or I'm going to blow your brains out. And my great grandmother said, it's time to go, it's time to go. And so literally packed up the kids, drove from Arkansas to middle of nowhere California, and start a whole life for themselves. And so just not even Oakland too, but just being able to see these badass black women doing what they needed to do and then setting me up to be in a position to achieve everything that I want. And because every generation is better than the last, my mom was like yeah I'm going to have you in the best schools, I'm going to give you every opportunity that I didn't have, I want you to have everything, you're going to use that to help someone else behind you. And so just being in the midst of those...my mom is like my everything, like my rock and she's done everything to make sure that I could be the person I am today but just to be surrounded by those women, my whole life has just been...and to hear their stories, you know. It's done a lot for me, so that...and then they were right there with me at the movie theater. I was cracking up with my mom yesterday because we went to go see Black Panther when it came out in the movie theaters and my grandma, she was calling frustrated on the phone and she was like yeah, we went to go see Black Panther but he wasn't like one of the real Black Panthers like we saw riding around the 60s and I was like, you missed the memo but that's ok. And so just the combining of where I'm from, the city, and the people, it's just made me who I am. So yeah, and one more thing I say about Oakland, is the best thing about Oakland

is you can't even put it into words, the best part about Oakland's culture, and it's the people. And like I said, I grew up on protest, peaceful protest, hippie singing in the park, just vibing, saying, in the war, wherever, that's just where...that's the context of where I grew up. People just always speaking out against something, and just made you passionate to do it. And so I just think all those things together, it's not even one thing I can describe, I'm just, I'm blessed and fortunate to have been around all these people that have just made me me.

WATTS (45:43)

That's really, I think that's really beautiful. The way in which like your family, and your community as a whole, are very...it kind of honed in and was able to support you and help you become this product that you are now and continuing that cycle of helping others and supporting others and all the things that you are doing and hope to do. So I really love that.

BATTLE (46:10)

Thank you.

WATTS (46:12)

No problem. Ok, moving on. Ok, shifting gears just a little bit, but what would you say is the most important thing to remember in your field of activism?

BATTLE (46:28)

Stay true to your beliefs, and to honestly, honestly to not let what anybody else has to say about you define how you see yourself. As a life skill, that's the activist skill, whatnot. But I think before you get to this work, it's important to do an inventory check of yourself, and like what are the things I value? Who do I want to be in this world? How do I want to help other people and what are my core beliefs and values, and if you are honest and true—and those things can change. You don't have to stick to them...well you should try like, you shouldn't have them change for the worst. But when you stick to them, they can grow and change, but when you act with that aligning you, it doesn't matter what anybody else says about you. And I used to be someone who in my activist work, and I was the person I cared what people thought. I did. And I wanted to, I really wanted to be the excellent black person who could do it all. I wanted to be the straight A student, be the activist, be loved and none of those things aren't genuine and true, but I just felt like everyone's investing in me and I want to do right by everybody. But it doesn't matter what people say about you, it really doesn't when you are checked in with yourself. Because at the end of the day, the only person you have to answer to is yourself. And then if you're religious, the man upstairs. And so I think that when you don't let other people define or have power over you, you walk through this world and you just know I did all I could. And if you didn't, ok, you do better the next time. And I think that's just important. I think the other thing is to not let...to protect your peace. Once again, it's a life skill, it's an activist skill, but you do a lot of heavy work, the winds are minimal. You have to choose your lane sometimes depending on

what you want to happen. And so I think it's about protecting your peace at all costs, because other...when you are not fed, mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and you don't have peace within yourself, how can you help other people? And so I think it's to protect your peace, to love on your peace, to nurture your peace, and to not let other people take that peace from you. Because then you can't help anybody else.

WATTS (48:41)

Just spitting facts.

(BATTLE immediately laughs and continues on)

BATTLE (48:46)

But honestly these are things too that I have even just developed like more recently in my life too. I...like very real talk, when COVID hit, I had to slow down my life and do an inventory check. Like who do I want to be in this world, right? And like I am who I am at this moment, am I doing what I need to do to be that person? And that's why I can I think speak with a lot of that sureness now, because I have committed to being a part of that journey. And even now, like two years later, I'm still asking myself those questions all the time. But before I don't think I was doing that enough. So for example, when someone would say something about...because an example of this, is I remember I always cared about black people. It's always been my thing, and I used to get called an oreo, like all the time.⁵ And I was like...and a lot of black kids are called oreo, but I was like now how are you gonna call me oreo and I can tell you front and back about our history. Ok. And there's also...and it's never ok to call someone an oreo, but I'm also one of those people who knows everything about Black culture. It's not even...I don't understand where the joke's even coming from because I could tell you back and forth anything you need to know. And so I remember that used to hurt me. I was like wow, I'm trying to do all this for my black people and I'm not getting this love back. And so, that was before I even got to college. That was when I was younger, but being honest with yourself is being like: you can think that, you can say that, that doesn't affect me. That's your hang up, deal with that. But that has no effect on how I moved through with it and who I'm going to continue to fight for. And so it's just, it can be little things like that that can get to you. And I think in the activist world where everyone wants to be woke and trendy these days, someone always has something to say. Ok, whatever, next step, I don't care. And sometimes the criticism is constructive and healthy, but you also just take that with a grain of salt, because one thing I often tell myself is who are you to tell me about my experience, or how I should maneuver in this world? But still take advice from mentors, not saying don't do that, but take it all with a grain of salt.

WATTS (50:48)

⁵ Calling someone an oreo is oftentimes a derogatory way of referring to a black person as someone who has attributes similar to those of middle class white individuals so much that it expunges their black culture.

I think that's...yeah. I just need, I just think about it. Making sure I just let what you say just sit and so I can absorb it, for the people that see this or hear this or read this, so that they can absorb it as well. Just letting your words have their moment. I think that's really important. So yeah.

BATTLE (51:07)

Thank you.

WATTS (51:09)

Ok...

BATTLE (51:10)

Also I'm listening, I'm just going to turn off my camera really quickly, because I just have to change clothes for this event. So I'm listening. I'm here. I'm gonna turn off my camera.

WATTS (51:18)

Yeah, no problem. Do your thing. Ok. Ok. Ok, second to last question. When looking at Youth Activism, who do you want...Oh, wait, I'm sorry. When looking at youth activists who want to do more...wait, ok. Ok, I'm mixing up one of my questions. Ok, this is like a weird intro for it, but this is the final question. I'm so sorry. But yeah, so taking in everything that you have said, which I greatly, greatly appreciate. Do you have any final thoughts or ideas that you want to leave with anyone who ends up reading, watching, or seeing this?

BATTLE (52:15)

Yeah, I think...can you hear me ok still?

WATTS (52:20)

Yes.

BATTLE (52:21)

Ok. One thing I would really like to tell young people's that there's no correct way to be an activist. And even as I've thought about my time at Duke, and what I want to do and as I try to figure out career path of like oh, what's not a sellout thing to do, or this or that, and I realize that, like I said, everybody has their own lane in everything that they do. And I think that there's power in whatever you do, as long as you're rooted in the things that you really care about. And, and like I said, and who you want to be in this world and how you want to make a change. So I think that it's very, very important to...I think it's important to you know, like, Oh, my God, I can prove her as I can you scratch this out. I totally lost my train of thought. I totally forgot. I was saying,

Unknown Speaker 53:08

It's ok, take your time.

Unknown Speaker 53:09

I'm so sorry. I totally blanked. Ok, well, whatever. I was saying something. Anyways, the other thing I think is important, is about finding people who...I think it's important to find people who push you to be your best self as a person and as an activist. I think a lot of my perspectives on activism also come from just life in general. While I've been in a lot of fellowships, that have been around young people who have pushed me to think about things differently, and to see the world differently, I've just had such a more rich and full experience. And so I think whenever you can take the opportunity to be around people who are interested in similar things to you and thinking, how can I learn from other people and other strategies and other ways of life, because I think there's such a beauty and community in fellowship. But I also think it's important to leave things that don't serve you like I know even in my time at Duke, I've had to quit things and leave things when I didn't believe in the programming or the messaging because it didn't reflect the things that I was interested in as a person and weren't pushing me in the ways that I needed. So don't be afraid to, when things don't feel right and you get a little itch in the back of your head and you're like I don't know about this I don't know about if this is like the message I want to promote, especially with activism, like that's important. Be able to walk away and commit to the things that bring you peace and happiness and further your activist agenda. So yeah, I think I think that's it. Oh, and the other thing that I can't express enough is know your history. Know, know, know your history. That's like the biggest thing I can tell people that people seem to neglect. I don't want to sound too hippie-dippie, but like the colonizer, the oppressor, he does not want you to know about your history, and know about your roots and knowledge is power, knowledge is everything. And there's so many people who've tried these things beforehand. And the one thing I don't, I'm not as excited about with this modern day activism is sometimes we're not always rooted in what people in the past have done, and what they've learned, and the drawbacks of that too. And so I'd say, know your history, because that's the only way that we do better than what we've done in the past. And grow and adapt. So yeah, those are my words of wisdom.

WATTS (55:31)

Oh my gosh, Gabby, I want to say thank you so much. Amazing experience for me. I'm glad to take in all these things that you've given me in such great detail of the people that actually end up seeing this, that they are able to take it in with the same amount of openness and love and acceptance that I have had while listening to you. So I just want to say thank you and commend you on all the work that you have done.

BATTLE (55:59)

Thank you so much, Bri'Yon. I'm lowkey running late because I have to be at the circle in one minute, but like you're dope, you're amazing. I'm just so excited for you for this project. And

thank you so much for interviewing me, I'm going to send you a text on my way. But thank you so much for everything Bri'Yon.

WATTS (56:15)

Thank you. Oh my gosh.

BATTLE (56:17)

Ok, I'm gonna send you a text but I'll see you later. Ok?

WATTS (56:20)

Ok, bye.

BATTLE (56:21)

Bye.