Interview of Mia Vesely
Conducted by Ewan Dignon
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Mia Vesely is a current sophomore at the University of Pennsylvania, originally from Phoenix, Arizona. She has been active in the movement against gun violence as State Lead for March for Our Lives Arizona. Additionally, she currently does work with Black Girls Skate, an organization dedicated to increasing representation of Black girls in any sport involving a skate.

EWAN DIGNON: It should be working, did it?

MIA VESELY: Okay, yeah. I got the little message thing.

DIGNON: Okay, so I know I have a bit of a little spiel.

VESELY: Oh, okay.

DIGNON: Yeah. So thank you so much for taking the time today to share some of your experience with us. And before we get started, I'm just going to review some of the ways we will handle the information. So stop me if you have any questions. And if I can't answer them, I can direct you to someone who can, my professor, someone in the archives, but simply put the interview is yours. You own the content. At the end of your time today. I'll upload the recording to a safe drop box within Duke. It's called Box. I'll transcribe it over the next few days and send it back to you to review and you'll have full ownership of that. You can edit it for whatever you like, mostly accuracy and if you decide there are parts of the interview, you'd like to edit out for any number of reasons. And then once we've completed the transcription and I have your permission to upload it—that's that consent form I sent you

VESELY: Okay nice.

DIGNON: They'll put it to the public repository at Duke in an archive of youth activism since the 2010s. And there'll be likely things you share today that are very important and I don't know enough about to form good questions, so I might just need to take a second to think of a good follow-up, and that's not unusual for our industry or interviews. And I'd also like permission to ask some follow-ups via email if need be. Is that cool?

VESELY: Of course. Yes, perfect.

DIGNON: Spiel done. So again, thank you so much for taking the time. And would you mind just talking a little bit about how you got involved with youth activism in high school?

VESELY: Yeah, so my mom likes to say that when she was pregnant with me, she was always outside like protesting. She was like, you grew up around just a culture of, you know, protests and speaking up for what you believe in. And my household was very big on that. My mom's very, very much an advocate and took me to protests when I was little and I'd make signs of like,

it was very something that I thought was important and luckily as I grew up, my issues and my personal beliefs kind of aligned with those of my family as I got older. So it's very nice, I get to—they support me and I can support the causes that they like to. In high school, I think one of the things that I was involved with, probably the biggest way I engaged as a youth activist was with March for Our Lives[1] and I started as just a volunteer. Some of my friends at a different high school were very involved in it and I was like, okay, I can get behind this and my own community. I'm from the inner city, I'm from Phoenix, Arizona, but I live downtown and have faced a lot of gun violence just in my own community. When I was younger, like one of my houses was actually like shot up because they were—they had a problem with a neighbor, but it was like, there were still things that I saw and I lived through that kind of made me realize that gun violence was a rampant issue. And so I just started volunteering, started going to marches or sit-ins at the State Capitol and kind of learning more about just gun violence in my state and how readily available guns were, because Arizona is one of the states that had concealed carry and things like that and so I was like, oh my gosh, this is actually ridiculous. And so as I got more involved, I started off as just like a volunteer and then was a City Lead and then was eventually the State Lead. And that was really cool because I got to interact with different state chapters, both college, high school, and city and then un-affiliated too. And so through that, I was able to organize at my school and just throughout the greater community and one of the things I saw in March For Our Lives that I kind of was critical of was, I feel like a lot of the higher-up activists were people from the suburbs or from places that I didn't necessarily understand that they knew the impact that gun violence really had on people who dealt with it every day or who had lost friends and family to gun violence. So one of my big goals as State Director was to get people who were in those communities more involved and to be able to see themselves in March because there were honestly not a lot of wide varieties of ethnicities or things like that in the leadership of March. So I was like, okay, I want to act kind of as a liaison for my community and an organization that we really felt like wasn't for us necessarily all the time. And so through working with March, I also worked with the Arizona ACLU[2] and the Police Free Schools Coalition[3]. That was a thing that we were like a chair member of, I guess. And so through that, I worked with some other organizations like Puente Youth[4] and like Poder in Action[5], a lot of Hispanic youth-led activists, because Arizona, there's a lot of Hispanic people, we are a border state. So the intersectionality of gun violence was something we really talked about and stressed in that coalition and understanding like how school push-out and things like that also impacted youth and their experiences at school and with the police, as far as SROs[6] in schools and things like that too. So just like a lot of overlying issues and fundamental root causes to gun violence that we kind of addressed. But yeah, that was my biggest introduction to youth activism.

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[1] A nationwide organization founded in the wake of the Parkland, FL massacre pushing for stricter gun control legislation and gun violence prevention methods.
[2] Referring to the American Civil Liberties Union.
[3] #PoliceFreeSchools is a nationwide movement started by the Alliance for Educational Justice and the Advancement Project seeking to remove police officers from schools.
[4] An organization of Latinx youth in Arizona advocating for the human rights of migrants in their community, primarily against police brutality.
[5] Poder in Action is a local Arizona organization dedicated to dismantling systems of oppression through local public policy.
[6] Referring to School Resource Officers, or police officers that work in schools.

DIGNON: Yeah, you were actually quoted in the Washington Post on the school SRO thing. And I was wondering if you could talk a little bit why you think it's important that School Resource Officers are not as present in high schools?

VESELY: Yeah, it's actually interesting because at the time of that quote, my district, my high school district, had eliminated SROs. I worked on a movement for the district to make that happen. But it's actually really sad because a couple years ago, it was actually overturned and SROs are back. And I'm like, dang, like, I don't—I'm not even in Arizona anymore, so I'm not really doing that organizing as much. But I think the fundamental reason I guess that we felt uncomfortable around SROs was it was kind of a lot of students, especially in my school, were undocumented and things like that. And it can kind of be a bit threatening when it's like "Is this person who's meant to protect me going to end up hurting me and my family or, reporting to the government that my parents are undocumented or things like that?" It was kind of a—I don't know, there were underlying issues, not just of safety, but of people's personal livelihood that came from having SROs on campus that made them feel unsafe. And I remember, I went to a big public high school, like there were thousands of people in each grade, so, I mean, I understand that school safety is very important and it's not really a thing of like, oh, we don't want things to keep us safe. It's more so that we want things that will actually protect us. So it kind of felt as though SROs, and especially having a gun on campus, kind of made people feel even more unsafe than other forms of security and more student-led and kind of protecting student interest. One of the issues we had too was kind of about how funding was allocated. They were funding SROs exponentially, but not funding things like counseling. I remember my school had one counselor who was a college counselor and a mental health counselor and had probably so many other jobs as well tied up in that. And so when you're focusing on funding officers who don't have adequate training. A lot of SROs were retired cops or former army people or things like that and not really funding mental health and resources that students need and I saw a present need for those things on my campus and instead funding like public safety officers. It just didn't seem fair to students who needed other forms of support that they were not getting and that were being severely underfunded.

DIGNON: Do you know why they got reinstated?

VESELY: I think there was a vote done, and after COVID, a lot of people started going back to school and things like that and there were a lot of issues and I think just it's a hard time to be a youth member. There's a lot going on. We can be like stressors and things so I think that they decided that that was the easiest way forward for safety rather than addressing any of the underlying things that we've been talking about for years and years. It was more so we just needed more officers on campus. So it's sad. It does feel like a setback and I know a lot of us who organized against SROs are kind of like, well, what was that for? They just reinstated it a couple of years later after pledging to not. So it's just an unfortunate situation, but yeah.

DIGNON: Jumping back to your time as State Lead with March For Our Lives, how did you balance those two factions, the suburban people who had never really known gun violence and you from inner city Phoenix who'd actually experienced stuff like that?

VESELY: I think, well, one of my things just in organizing that I think is important is listening to the community that you're trying to serve regardless of what it is. So let's say you're—one of the things that Penn actually I'm involved with, I'm a Civic Scholar, so it's like a scholars program we have here focused on civic engagement and it's kind of important to remember that you're an outsider to the community[7]. So instead of coming in with like, this is what you need, these are the solutions that I can present to you to fix your problem, it should be more mutual and it should be like what do you need from me in order to best assist you in this fight that is impacting you and your community that I maybe don't understand as well or haven't experienced as deeply and as personally as you may have. So I think one of the things that I tried to do in my time as Lead was to kind of also recognize that gun violence is something that impacts every youth member just based upon what we see online. We see shooting violence, see school shootings, see things like that in our everyday lives. So it does feel very inherently personal when you feel like you could be in danger. So never like invalidating that and being like, "Okay, you don't live here so you don't know what you're talking about" because it's important that if people are trying to help that they can be heard. And, it's never a form of maliciousness, like they're not trying to be malicious or trying to control something that they're not a part of because they're also equally as valid. But just kind of bridging understanding and letting people from communities who are impacted by gun violence to feel listened to and heard. Because even sometimes in March, I was like, "What are these people talking about? Like this just doesn't seem realistic or doesn't seem like something that they fully understand in the way that I do or things." So I think just allowing people to share their perspective and feel comfortable sharing it was kind of something that I wanted to do because I didn't want anyone to feel like they weren't heard or feel like they didn't have a place in the organization, and making space for those perspectives to be shared was also kind of important to me. And then connecting my friends and being like, "Oh, have you heard of March For Our Lives?" Because honestly, a lot of people hadn't even heard of it. Or if they had, they had heard of it in the context of like, "Oh, that's something that's in Florida. Like that's something that happened there. And that's something that organizes there solely and not really is an organization I could join or an organization that's here." So I really tried to spread awareness. That was one thing I tried to do. I tried to implement city or school leads. So people who were interested being like, "Okay, start a chapter at your school," rather than us or like someone else coming into that community and being like, "Okay, we're March For Our Lives" being like, "Okay, you guys can be March For Our Lives and whatever you need from us or for me as a State Director, as far as funding, visibility, what can I do to help you with that?" So kind of making it more independent organizing kind of under one chapter, rather than this is like what we're sending you and telling you to do. It was more so like, what do you need from us and what can we do to support you?

DIGNON: That makes a lot of sense, but then how do you integrate the diverse opinions that come from a number of different school leads coming into some sort of central organization?

[7] A program at the University of Pennsylvania connecting undergraduates with organizations in the broader Philadelphia community.

VESELY: Yeah, it was really difficult. And I think that's one of the problems that March is still having to this day. I was only State Lead for one year and after that I was like - it was honestly so stressful. It was the most stressful job I've ever had and I think that youth activism comes with that. We were all very young obviously and people had, you know, other things going on. When I was Lead it was like during my college app season and I was like, I, this is so much. So I think that it can be, it can seem very dysfunctional. And they just went, when I was leaving, they were going through a reformation period as an organization and changing the way that they were doing things. So I think they did recognize that it was very difficult and kind of unsustainable to have it be so disjointed because there were national initiatives that we were pushing. We were supporting Defund the Police and things like that, but there were members of March for Our Lives, we were like, "That's not what we support, we're not behind that." So it can be very difficult when you have underlying goals as an organization and like individual subsets of the organization don't support those national goals that are being set up without asking them sometimes. So it was very difficult to navigate those types of things. Sorry, I don't know if this is necessarily answering your question, but.

DIGNON: It does.

VESELY: Yeah, yeah.

DIGNON: It gets at the root of it, I think. Would you mind just talking a little bit about what other organizing you did with March, aside from the school leads, like if you had any key initiatives or anything like that?

VESELY: Yeah, so I think our biggest initiative was dealing with SROs in schools and so as I was saying, like the Police Free Schools coalition with the ACLU, we would meet once a week, and after successfully getting us out of my school district, we moved on to a different school district in Arizona. I believe it was Sunnyslope[8]—it's a city in Phoenix, but so we would go to their school board meetings. So my biggest thing was like every week I would organize and we would come with posters and help organize transportation and things. And we would sit in on their school board meetings and then speak. And there was already a chapter of March at the school in the school district that wanted us to do that, but it was more so they just wanted more people. And so we worked with the ACLU and they drafted a letter of support for us in our initiative and sent that to the school board and we would speak and we would have transportation organized for people. So what I would mainly do is, like, if people need transportation, I would help pay for Ubers or help organize them to pick them up. And then for some meetings, we would make posters beforehand in a park around the corner. So I would bring that supplies and maybe bring food or something and do it all organized together and then walk over together and sit through that meeting. And if people want to speak, they could obviously like, say their own speech that they had written themselves or we had like a template of something we can send. We had email templates too. So we kind of focused our efforts on that one school district, is what I kind of did on the ground. And then in addition to that, we had chapters at ASU, U of A, and NAU[9], so the

[8] Sunnyslope is within Phoenix, AZ, but maintains a distinct cultural identity separate from the city.
[9] Arizona State University, the University of Arizona, and Northern Arizona University, respectively

colleges in the state and they would do their own type of initiatives. And sometimes if they needed support, they would ask me to either spotlight it on our state social media, or if it was something that wanted to be highlighted on national level, I could, you know, communicate there. So I think as a State Director, my main responsibilities were serving as a liaison from the state to the national chapter. And then I would have meetings with other state directors and then like Southwest call meetings too. So like all the states around that area. And then we would talk about initiatives going on in our state and kind of team build and just build community. And then also I would plan statewide things sometimes. So statewide hub gatherings or things like that for us to be on Zoom together. And this was kind of during COVID still. So it was very hard to organize; we would be wearing masks. I always had masks on me, making sure that everyone was being safe and distanced and things like that. So the majority of our organizing was online when it was going to be a lot of people. And we would just talk, like have icebreakers or talk about things going on and yeah, just, you know, community build. Because I think that that's a very important part of organizing is, you have to feel like your interests are heard and not even just your interests, but you as a person are known to the people who are in the organization and, you know, "I know your first name, you know mine" and just things like that. So trying to build community too.

DIGNON: Yeah. Do you think that community building really helps a movement keep volunteers and keep people motivated towards a common goal?

VESELY: I think so. I would say, I know personally, like I am more active in things where I feel my effort is valued and not just that, but when I'm struggling that's also valued and I feel comfortable speaking out when it's maybe too much or yeah. So I just think it's important for people to feel that they can be vulnerable in the work environment that they're in and especially when it came to an issue like gun violence and something so hurtful to so many people, it's important that people felt, if something was too much for them that week, they could feel comfortable speaking out and taking that time.

DIGNON: Now jumping to the school board meetings, I know there's a bit of an issue with school boards actually taking students seriously. In a lot of cases, did you ever run into any community opposition with March from the school board members or from, I don't know, even the audience.

VESELY: Yes, no, the school board, that school board was so mean. And I, my school board, when we did that there in Phoenix Union[10], they were not mean. Like they were very nice. And so those people were very supportive and would reach out to us after and kind of were aligned with us. But this school board was so not nice. There'd be times before you spoke, you had to sign up 30 minutes before the meeting or you wouldn't be able to be on the agenda. And there were times where they would take the sheet away, They would have it in a designated spot and they would move it to the back and we'd be like, "Where's the sign up sheet? and they'd be like, "Oh, okay, we're going to get it for you." And it would take 15 minutes and bring it out five minutes before the deadline and just cause us so many issues. And there were times where I was like, this

[10] A high school-only district existing in Phoenix, fully the Phoenix Union High School District.

is actually ridiculous. They are really trying to censor us. So yeah, or times and people would be speaking and they would just be looking away or rolling their eyes even. And I thought that that was kind of crazy because I had never experienced that from anyone before. But it did really seem like they didn't take the issue seriously and it was a more conservative district than the one I was in. So maybe that was part of it. I think that they were very invested in having SROs and having that as a form of security at the schools. So they didn't really see other people's points of view. Yeah. But yeah, so that was definitely difficult and we did experience issues like that from the school board.

DIGNON: Yeah, it seems really aggressive the differences between, you said Sunnyslope, right? Yeah. Were there differences in like, was it a more suburban district? Is that?

VESELY: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

DIGNON: Anyways, now moving on, I know you're part of an organization now called Black Girl Skate.

VESELY: Yes.

DIGNON: Do you want to just talk a little bit about how you got involved with that?

VESELY: Yes. So Black Girls Skate is easily the funnest job organizing I've ever had. Because before I had only organized for things that were like, really negative, or very centered around curbing things that were just awful atrocities. So this organization is very much focused on more positive things, which I like. It's about uplifting Black women in skating sports and as well as LGBTQ individuals who identify as Black in all sports involving skating. So ice skating, roller skating, skateboarding, anything with wheels. All Wheels Welcome is like our little slogan. But yeah, so anyways, during quarantine, I tried to skate, like I - I'm still a beginner skater. It's really funny because I worked in this organization and I can barely ollie.

DIGNON: It’s really hard.

VESELY: It is. It's so hard. I think. Yeah. So anyways, I got involved basically because I got a board during quarantine. I was like, okay, I want to be outside. What can I do outside alone and not endanger myself or others? And I was like, I’ll skateboard. This will be fun. And when looking for people to follow on social media, I was kind of like, I want to see someone who looks like you on a skateboard because I felt like I knew a lot of people who skated, but it was mainly like men and of that mainly like white men. I was like, no, I want to see a Black girl on a skateboard. And so on Instagram, I just typed in “Black girl skating” and it was the first thing that came up. And so I followed the Instagram account and probably like 2020 and I started working for the organization in January of this year, so I've almost done a full year this month. So I just followed the account for like two years and didn't really interact that much. I watched things, I liked both. So I was like, oh, this is cool. And then there was a post saying that they were hiring. And I was like, you know, I need a job. I'm in college now, like it was first semester, freshman year. And I was like, this looks fun. I have an organizing background. And I think that

it would be interesting because it's also a skill I'm still trying to learn and so I applied and I got the position. And yeah, I know the rest is history, I guess. I still work there to this day. And yeah, it's really cool.

DIGNON: What is your role at Black Girls State?

VESELY: Yeah, so there's three of us on the team actually. Like we're a very small team. There's three of us on the ground and then we have a board of directors and things. And so over the summer, we had a pop-up tour and I happened to be studying abroad in the summer, so I was in London. And so we were gonna go on Good Morning America and my boss was like, "We need to make roles" because I was originally just a team member. Like we're all called team members, it's nothing fancy or special, but she was like, because you're abroad and I was kind of connecting with people for the organization I was abroad to. I was going to skate parks and be like, "Hey, like have you heard of Black girls skate?" And so she was like, "Okay, you can be the international lead because you're good at this." So technically I'm the International Lead. We've done no international events yet though, which is so sad. We like to say we've been invited to every continent except Antarctica, because that is true. Like people hit us up in the DMs[11] or on our email or our website and they're like, "Please come to this event" and it will be in Australia. Or we've even had people from Japan reach out to us in other places in Asia. So it's very cool. Yeah, I'm just a team member slash International Lead.

DIGNON: You were talking about a pop-up tour. What do these pop-ups look like? Yeah, so in the summer, basically we have like a three quarter system. So right now we're in like our fundraising quarter. And then we do like planning and then we do our pop-up tour, which is like our biggest thing where we go to different cities in the US. And we hold skate meetups and pop-ups for people to come out and we give out care boxes that have skate essentials in them, so it'll have safety gear. It'll have a coloring book, stickers, magazines, any in-kind donations from some of our partners. This year we partnered with—Vans[12] was our main sponsor and Red Bull[13] and stuff. So we'd give out, you know, Red Bull, we'd give out things like that. And we give out skateboards and helmets and pads and things like that through raffles. And we also have skate coaches come to everything too. That's pretty cool. And we'll have a roller skating coach and a skateboard coach. And then if it's an ice pop-up, we'll have an ice skating coach. And we'll just create a safe space for people of all identities to come out to our events and just take over the skate park, like "takeover." So we have like a little speaker and just, you know, good vibes and any skate level is welcome. So there'll be people who are like pros, people who are beginners. And we went to a lot of different cities in the US. We kicked off our tour this year in Phoenix, where I'm from, which was so nice. And one of our other team members is from there too, which is kind of crazy because the organization's based in Atlanta, Georgia, so, to have two team members located in the Valley is pretty cool. And then we did Atlanta, Birmingham, LA, Chicago, and New York, I believe, was our tour stops for this summer.

DIGNON: Really cool.

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[11] Direct Messaging, a form of contacting people on the social media platforms Instagram and Facebook.
[12] Vans is a skateboarding-related apparel company.
[13] Red Bull is an energy drink company that also funds a number of sports events and organizations.

VESELY: Yeah, it was really cool. I got to go to all of them except for New York because I was away in Europe. But yeah, it was really cool to get to travel to so many cities and set up and have people like learn to skate and a lot of times there'd be like younger kids there and also older people as well. Like we had older people pop out and so it was really cool just to see people's faces light up when they get a care box. There's cute stickers or things like that or like win a new skateboard. So it's a really cool feeling.

DIGNON: Is it targeted at younger people or is it more anyone's welcome?

VESELY: It's targeted at all ages, I feel. It's like our biggest platform is Instagram. And so whoever's on Instagram, which is pretty much all ages, but I think the majority of ages we serve are like 20s, 30s, things like that. But also like a lot of kids and older people do come to our events too. And I think another misconception is people will be like, “Oh my god, if I'm not Black, can I come?: And it's like, “Yes! Everybody is welcome.” Just because we're focusing on uplifting one community doesn't mean an exclusion of others. Anyone's welcome to come out. Anyone can join the raffles. Anyone can take the lessons. So a lot of times there would be a lot of people of different races or even just sometimes people at the park would be like, “Oh, what's going on? Can we join this event?” And so yeah, “Of course, go ahead, get a raffle ticket”. So it is meant to be a community that bridges gaps and doesn't just uplift one community, but focuses on uplifting a marginalized community at the same time.

DIGNON: Why do you think there's so little Black female representation in skating, all skating sports?

VESELY: Yeah, I think when I think of roller skating, I think of Black people. I think of Black people on a roller rink, but when I think of ice skating, or I think of skateboarding, it's not the first image that pops into my head. And I think that that has to do with who has historically been represented in those sports. Because I know that there's Black people who skate. I'm around them all the time. I am one of them. But when you look up skating, it's not the first thing that you see. And so I think it's a societal kind of thing. Just it's not thought of as being something that Black people are the faces of, especially when it comes to ice sports. We have an ice rink pop-up in LA and it was really interesting because usually in our pop-ups, I feel like the skateboarding community is what I identify most with and what I've been around the most. And that is a cool community. People are so nice, so open. If you need anything, they're welcome to show you. It's a very welcoming sport, in my opinion. But ice skating, I don't really see that as much. And I don't ice skate, I cannot ice skate. But being at the pop-up, I was like, this is really amazing, because I don't think I've ever seen an ice rink just full of Black people. I don't think I've even seen two Black people at the ice rink before. So it was nice to just be able to provide that space, because it's not necessarily something that people don't do, it's just something that's not seen. So just providing a space for that representation to be seen is kind of our main priority.

DIGNON: You did a lot of community building with March. How do you build community with BGS? Do you abbreviate it? I don't know.

VESELY: Yes, we do. Yes, BGS. I think one of the strengths of BGS is that it is an online community primarily. So like people will DM us, we'll DM people, be like, “Oh my God, can we repost this?” People will tag us in stuff a lot and we'll comment and reshare. And I think that one of the beauties of social media and having that as a platform is that the community can be like people all over the world. And we don't necessarily all have to be in the same city or the same space. And it was kind of the same with March, but it was more so localized. Whereas this is like not localized at all. It's very much as long as you have a skateboard, roller skates, whatever it is, send in your content, regardless of what level you're at and we will spotlight it. And I think that that's really beautiful just because you don't really need to be anywhere with anyone, you can have that social media connection. It's really fun when we were going on our tour, like asking, what stop should we come to, and people are like, “Come to this city, come to that city.” and then we actually go there and we get to meet those people face to face and they'll be like, “Oh my God, like I know you from the Instagram” or “I've seen you in this or that.” So just that feeling of connection that, you know, bridges in-person familiarity. So I think that's a cool thing about the community for sure.

DIGNON: You're famous on the Instagram.

VESELY: Yeah, lowkey. It's funny.

DIGNON: Do you find social media to be a particularly effective tool for organizing in general, not just with BGS?

VESELY: I think so. I would say so, especially targeted towards youth members and younger people, because I don't know anyone who's not on their phone all of the time, or at least part of the time. And so just having that ability to have a connection on there is great. Like have a Twitter, have a TikTok, have an Instagram. We have all those things and we get engagement on them. And that's kind of a big way that people find us more so than just word of mouth or TV things or interviews we've done, like papers, it's more so just people typing in Black Girls Skate in their search bar like I did, and finding the account that way and finding that community. So I think that when it comes to organizing, it's important to have a central base, whether it's online or in person for people to go and know what you're about and see what you're about. And I think that social media offers that in a good way, usually most of the time. And so, I would say social media is important for organizing in this day and age.

DIGNON: Yeah, definitely. Now, how are you building on that pop-up tour in the coming year? Like, are you going to more cities? Are you expanding? Or I'm not sure.

VESELY:Yeah, so I believe that’s our plan. I don't know how much I'm allowed to say, but we—yeah, I know. Don't want to breach my NDA or anything. I'm just kidding. But basically, I think we're working on getting sponsors right now. We have some exciting things planned. People are coming with exciting donations. We have a lot of cool partnerships. We partner with

Thrasher[14], Vans, Red Bull, Chuffed Skates[15], which is a brand out of Australia who was kind enough to send us a lot of pairs of skates for our tour last year. And we saw some of those. We partner with like Triple 8 who does helmets and pads and safety gear and other things. We make our own skate wax. So we have a lot of stuff, we have merch, we have more designs coming, but yeah, it's like, I think the goal of BGS is to get bigger and bigger every year as our community grows. So I hope that this year's pop-up tour is bigger and better and we have a chance to go to more cities, but right now we're in our fundraising season. So depending on how that goes, it'll determine what we do. But yeah, we have a lot of things coming. So it's an exciting thing to be a part of.

DIGNON: Yeah. Why do you think providing the care boxes and lke materials through raffles is important to the community of skaters?

VESELY: Yeah, I think it's like, I don't know. I like getting gifts. Like as a person, like when someone's like, “Oh my God, here's this for you,” it's so exciting. And to feel recognized too, because our boxes are cute. It's not like we just hand them a cardboard box. No, we have our design on it. It says like Black Girls Skate. It's colorful with our colors. And it comes with a lot of stuff in it. So it's just exciting to open something and not know what it's gonna be. And then to feel recognized as a skater and as part of a community. Cause there's not a lot of skate things branded towards Black people, like there are, but we have our little stickers in there, like Black Girls Skating and things like that. We give out discount codes and things like that too, so it's cool if you want to work with one of our sponsored companies to go buy more things as well. And of course the safety gear, we give out mouth guards and hand sanitizer and first aid kits. So as a skater, that's always important because you will fall. You're going to scrape yourself at least once. So just to have that stuff. That is a barrier and have it handed to you is always great. And I think that even without the care boxes, the event is still strong because you meet other people from your community who skate who share the same demographic that you do a lot of the time. So that's pretty cool. But getting stuff on top of it is always fun. And one of my favorite parts of the job is when it comes time for the raffle and someone wins and I'm like “You won to skateboard,” and they're like, “Really? Like really?: You will cry. Because it's like a big deal to have that equipment. And sometimes that's a barrier for someone starting a sport is they just don't have the equipment to do it. So winning a brand new, fully complete skateboard is really life-changing for people when they wanna, you know, start something. So I love being able to, you know, make people's day and give them, you know, equipment. It's so fun and so fulfilling or to help put helmets on these little kids who are skating for the first time or pads or teaching them how to fall with the crash mats and realizing that helping them realize that it's not scary and that it's freeing and that they can do it and have fun and more importantly be safe while having fun. So yeah, I just I love it so much. It's fun.

DIGNON: Yeah, it sounds really fun. Why do you think representation is important in like merchandise and like I know you said you had your own skate wax.

[14] A skateboarding-related magazine.
[15] An Australian roller skating brand.

VESELY: Yeah, so I think that for me, what really helps me actualize my goals is seeing someone from my community, whether it be someone who looks like me, or has shared life experience or just shares any part of my perspective. Seeing that they can do it makes me think that I can. It's easier for me to envision myself when I see someone who looks like me doing that, than if I see someone who I feel like I have no similarities with. Ut's not impossible. I look up to people who have no similarities to I, but it's helpful sometimes to just see someone and be like, okay, like they're doing it and they look like me. And I didn't, I've never seen a Black person do that. Or I've never seen a woman do that or things like that. So I think it's important to be able to see yourself and visualize yourself in the shoes of others and realize that you're not alone too. Because when I first started skating, I was like, am I the only Black person who has a skateboard at all? And I was like, that can't be true. So I hopped on social media and I found out I wasn't. There's hundreds, thousands, probably more who do the same thing. And it's important not to feel alone in order to, you know, progress.

DIGNON: And you also talked about barriers to entry to the sport. How do you think you combat that with more than just care boxes or raffles? I'm not sure, how do you think you combat it?

VESELY: Yeah, I think one of the really cool things, we have a Sk8r Portal. Our founder DJ[16] works for Google and is a software engineer. So, you know, our stuff is really nice. They come through making good things for us. And so on our Sk8r Portal, skaters can sign up, coaches can sign up, things like that. And they can either offer lessons or ask for lessons or post about opportunities or even companies sometimes will contact us about casting calls. So it's really cool that we can forward that opportunity to our community if they need a specific person, sometimes we'll help. I think that it highlights how different people can do different things. Sorry, can you repeat your question? Someone walked in front of me that I knew.

DIGNON: I was just wondering how you combat barriers to entry to a training without, not without, with care boxes, but moving past that as well.

VESELY: Yes. So yeah, I think that the Sk8r Portal is one way that we do that besides care boxes because it allows people a centralized network for opportunity that extends beyond just receiving a one-time gift or a box. And then also our skate coaches that come to our pop-ups, they're usually local coaches. It's not like they fly out with us from the team, it's people from that community. So they're able to stay in touch with the people who come. So if they're teaching someone and they're really vibing, they're skating well together, they're able to stay in contact and connect with each other beyond just that one time event and continue either getting lessons or just supporting each other. So I think it really comes down to the person-to-person connections that stem from our organization and that really helps eliminate those barriers. And I feel like a lot of barriers to entering a sport like skating are a lot of mental ones as far as like, “Oh, that looks crazy. Like look at what Tony Hawk's doing. Like I could never do that.” But when you see someone doing something small, you're like, “Okay, I can start with this. I can learn that.” And also like the safety gear, that's really helpful to eliminating barriers because I

[16] Referring to BGS founder DJ Gooden.

know that when I'm not wearing a helmet, I get so scared to do things. And so providing those things for people that they can keep and not just use in return. Cause we do have loaner stuff, but sometimes if you win, we give out helmets and stuff to you as well through raffles. And so those things are things that people can keep to continue eliminating those barriers, whether mental or physical or just they don't know anyone, now they do know someone who skates in their area.

DIGNON: Do you see a lot of engagement with the Sk8r Portal with people finding each other?

VESELY: We just launched it a couple months ago, so not as much yet, but there are some people who use it and coaches are on there and stuff. So it's definitely something that we're going to try to perfect and put out there more. We also have monthly newsletters and stuff where we highlight. We used to do Skater of the Month, and so we would highlight one skater from our community who's on our social media or on our Sk8r Portal and highlight them in their skating journey and then provide them with something that they need for their skating journey to continue. So that's a cool initiative we had to just show people who's who and get people's names out there and connect with others. So we have a lot of initiatives that are kind of just starting back up and some are kind of on a lull right now just due to it being the end of the year.

DIGNON: Yeah, the newsletter also provides another opportunity for people to see themselves represented, which...

VESELY: Yes, definitely.

DIGNON: ...you talked about being something so important. And now I know very early on you were talking about your parents, you're born at a protest kind of thing. I was wondering what in your personal life led you to be way more involved in activism than the average person.

VESELY: Yeah, I think. Lots of things. There's no one clear thing I can point to. I think one thing is like, I grew up on the receiving end of a lot of help. Like me and my mother were homeless for a time being. So we would go to food banks. I would get clothes from, you know, donation centers and things like that. And then I attended a summer camp for low-income or homeless youth. And now I volunteer and I work for that summer camp too. So a lot of the things that I do as far as activism are things that have either impacted me in my own life or I've seen impact others in my own community. Usually it's things that have impacted me or like relate to me personally because I find I'm so much more invested in things where I've seen both sides. And I feel like now that I'm in a position, as I got older, it was like I was in a position to give back more so, at least give my time and my energy and hold a deep passion for the issues that I had experienced. And so I was kind of just inspired based upon that, to give back or to at least help because I had received so much help before and I understand that it's really important. So it feels deeply personal, like a lot of my engagement. And it's something that I get a lot of enjoyment from being able to like help and spread my voice. Because I think that that's something that we're all born with that cannot be taken away from us. So if you have one and you have something to say, you should use it and you should get involved.

DIGNON: Yeah, particularly if it's something you're passionate about. I mean, it seems like you're passionate about a wide array of issues. Would you be able to elaborate a little more on the summer camp that you volunteer at?

VESELY: Yeah. So it was called Swift Youth[17]. When I went, it was very interesting because I was always, when I was a kid and me and my mom would receive help, I was always so embarrassed. Like I was a very embarrassed kid to be receiving things. And I feel when I went to the camp, I was about 12. And it was basically run by, you had teenage counselors who all came pretty much exclusively, at least in my time there, came from rich neighborhoods and schools, like all Scottsdale, Paradise Valley, rich affluent areas, and then inner city kids from poor communities. And so even at 12, I kind of noticed that it was just a little bit weird, kind of, in my opinion, to have all these college-bound teen mentors and all these like high-risk kids. And I feel like, not that the counselors looked down on me or anything, because they were all really nice people and when I went back, actually, one of my counselors, I got to be a co-counselor with her. So that was really cool and to forge those connections. But I wanted to go back after having experienced a summer camp as a counselor, because they need representation of people in positions of power, positions of mentorship who are from the community that the kids are from. So I thought that was really important. So I decided to—and the thing too is I had to reach back out and apply. It wasn't like they stayed in contact with the kids who had gone to the camp to offer any type of mentor opportunities. It was something I did on my own to go and ask. And so I started volunteering. And I think before COVID, I was a counselor and then I was a counselor again. And then last summer I was support staff, which is kind of like a counselor, but you run the activities instead of staying in the cabins with the kids. And I feel like one of the beauties of that organization is that I'm able to share my experience because a lot of people come to the camp because their parents were counselors or because they're like “Oh these kids need so much help and I feel like I need to like help them” and I can kind of be there like, “Maybe you're underestimating these kids,” you know what I mean? I like being able to talk to them and be like, “Oh my God, I'm from the same area you are. I went to that school too,” or things like that. Or like, “Oh my gosh, your favorite restaurant is my favorite restaurant” or things like that I feel are kind of missing, that were kind of missing before people started coming back. And I think one of the things too is, my first year when I did it, I really told my campers, I was like, please guys, come back. This does not end here. Like you can come back in my role. You can be a mentor. Like you can come back and you know, have a cabin and I really stressed that. And then last year, one of the girls actually did come back and it was very sweet because we were in a staff meeting and she was like, “I would not be here if not for Mia telling you that I could be here.” And that was really touching for me because I think that my whole goal in that was to hope that kids could see me as a mentor when I kind of couldn't see the people there as one necessarily, and kind of foster that cycle of like giving back to something that's given to me and provide that representation that I felt that they were lacking. And so it's been really amazing to get to work with that organization on the other side. It feels very cyclical and I like that about it.

[17] An organization based in Scottsdale, AZ providing the summer camp experience to low-income children.

DIGNON: What benefits do you think that kind of cyclical camp counseling mentorship has for children? Like, do you think they connect much better with you?

VESELY: I think sometimes, I mean, obviously it depends, like, it's not that people who are interested in being a counselor and aren't from that community shouldn't be a counselor. They're all great counselors and great role models, regardless. But I think that more so for me, it was kind of in showing the kids that they can be in the position of a mentor and start from being a camper and coming to being a counselor and not just feeling as though like, "Oh, my only role here is to be the person who's being taught and not be the teacher" and being able to come back and share life experiences and also represent that college-bound individual because that was kind of what they, that was the whole set up of the organization. It was like, here's at-risk kids, here's college-bound people, and there's a line in between that, and those two things are mutually exclusive. And it was like, no, you can be from a poor community and still be smart and still be a role model. And it shouldn't just be so divisive in the way that those things are phrased. And I feel like that can kind of even stifle kids if they feel like they can serve no role on the other side of that line.

DIGNON: So what did the mentorship actually look like at the camp for you and for the other counselors?

VESELY: Yeah. So if you were a counselor, what you would do is you would, it was like a four day camp, very short and it was all paid for, but it was actually funny because you as a counselor had to pay to volunteer. It was more so like you would pay to volunteer at the camp and then the kids would get to go for free. And so you would get there a day early and set up, set up the cabin. It would be you and like two to three other co-counselors and a group of about 10 to 11 kids in a cabin and then three counselors. And it was ages, I want to say like seven to 12, it was three different age groups. There was youngest, middle and oldest units and then split between boys and girls. And so you would just escort the kids to all the activities, serve meals, put them to sleep at night. All of those things, you're basically like parents for the week. Just as like any camp, you would do all of those things.

DIGNON: It's really great that you were able to go back and help out and make a difference in those kids' lives. How have you continued your activism work at Penn specifically, which is itself the PWI.

VESELY: Yes, yeah. One of the things I looked for in college when deciding where to go is I wanted to be in a city because I'm from a city and I cannot be in like the woods or something like I cannot be in a rural environment. I don't think that it would vibe well with me. And I also wanted to be in a place where I could see opportunities to do activism and service because that's really what's most important to me and what I enjoy doing most. And so when coming to Penn, I did a pre-orientation program called PennCORP, which was focused on civic engagement in Philly[18]. And so even before officially becoming a student, that was like what I entered Penn with

[18] PennCORP is for students at the University of Pennsylvania to be introduced to Philadelphia through community service opportunities put together by the school's Civic House.

was learning about service opportunities in Philly. And I think that Penn is, I don't know if this is unique among prestigious schools, but there is kind of a notion of, if you go to Penn, you're better than like the community around you, or you have all the answers, or we have a right to be here. And it's kind of interesting because Penn is in Center City and a part of Philadelphia called West Philly, just barely across the river. And this was originally a community called the Black Bottom, and it was like a Black community. And then Penn kind of wiped it out, and Drexel did as well, and some other universities, and now it's called University City. So one of the things we focused on in that pre-orientation was kind of Penn's place in, you know, gentrification and Penn's history within Philly that isn't always a positive one. And those are obviously things that Penn doesn't, you know, tell people. Because why would you say that? Like, it's not, it's not a good look necessarily. And so just learning about that history was important for me in situating myself because back home, I was, you know, part of a marginalized community. But here, I go to Penn. Like when I walk around Philly, I walk around as a Penn student, and it was kind of important for me to realize that distinction of like, I am a person who benefits from the institution that has power in this neighborhood. And so when interacting in the neighborhood, it's more so a learning opportunity for me rather than one in which I'm directing. So that's been interesting in how I do service here at Penn because I'm coming from an outside perspective rather than like the inner one. And so after the orientation program, it was with this organization at Penn called Penn Civic House, which is kind of the civic opportunity hub of Penn. And they have a four year scholars program. So I applied to that, and I'm in the 2026 cohort, I guess you would say, and there's about, there's 10 of us so it's not a big program but we all work with community partners in Philly and further our civic engagement that way. And right now I'm working with a community partner called Why Not Prosper. It's for women who were formerly incarcerated. And now they're transitioning back into, it's transitional housing and also opportunities for those women. And so it's a really cool opportunity. It's a cool organization. A lot of the activism and like, I guess, volunteering that I'm doing with them is virtual because it is pretty far. It's like a 40 minute train ride from here. So I don't go out there very often. I do a lot of virtual stuff and just help the people who run the organization with little tasks that they may need. But yeah, I think that's the main way that I civically engage. And then also I'm part of the NAACP at Penn[19]. So we do a lot of volunteering. And then in one club I'm in, it's called Campus Curls. It's about natural hair. So the majority of the people in the club are like black women or like people with textured hair types. So there's also like Latino people in it too. And I'm Community Service Chair for that organization, so I organize events for us around Philly to just volunteer and things like that.

DIGNON: So you're kind of part of a small group of people that does civic engagement with Philadelphia. How do you think the university as a whole could better engage with the city?

VESELY: I think that Penn is a very like pre-professional place. Like people are very focused on what can I do to get ahead in my career or what can I do to set myself up. And it's very much a place that encourages you to be selfish. It encourages you to compete and encourages you to think about yourself rather than think about others and even just in the way that the campus is structured. There's this thing called the Penn Bubble which is kind of this, I guess, euphemism

[19] The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

for the way that people don't leave campus and we live in our own bubble as far as like we have a grocery store, we have our own like streets that used to be like a street you could drive on and now is like paved. It's just kind of, we are separate within the Philadelphia community. There's very much a Penn community and a Philadelphia community and they don't necessarily always interact with each other all of the time in positive ways. I took an anthropology class my first semester here and we were talking about how landmarks and construction can even be like exclusionary things. Like we have this big sculpture on the walkway to our campus and we were talking about how that can serve as like oh okay like, if you're a Penn student, you look at that and you're like, proud, but if you're not, it could maybe be like, "I'm not supposed to be here." Even though it is a public street, it feels very much like you shouldn't be on it unless you're at Penn or like you're going to class or you live on that street or something like that. So I think Penn could do a lot of things differently. I think that, one thing is also Penn doesn't pay taxes, obviously, because it's a federal institution, but they're taking up more and more land in this area. So schools are underfunded and things like that. So there's a big push for Penn to pay PILOTs, so payments in lieu of taxes, to Philly schools, and things like that. So I think that Penn could do an overall better job of allowing people who are students here to feel as though they're part of the community rather than better or not having reasons to leave. And also just caring more about others because it is just very pre-professional which is fine if that's what you're looking for. But you could spend four years here and not really engage with the community at all beyond just attending an Eagles game or going to a fancy restaurant in Center City and not actually ever do any form of meaningful service or meet anyone who's actually from the community.

DIGNON: Wow. So that's actually all I had from my end. Do you have any closing thoughts? Anything else you'd like to add?

VESELY: I don't think so. I think that like, I don't know, being a student activist is fine. I don't know if I would necessarily consider myself an activist. I would consider myself just like a person who's passionate. But I think that anyone can be an activist. Anyone, as long as you have something you're passionate about, just, you know, go for it and share your perspective. And then meet others who think similarly or differently, and that can be helpful too, in, you know, understanding perspectives that don't align with you. I think that—I feel like I'm in a good place to do things that I feel passionate about and I wouldn't change that. I do like where I am and the journey I've taken so far and what I've been involved with. I hope to find more things that I'm interested in and further the things that I am. But yeah, thanks.

DIGNON: Thank you so much for taking the time to speak to me. Again, I'll get this transcript back to you as soon as I can. Feel free to review and edit. And there's a consent form I sent you that if you have any questions…

VESELY: Yeah. I will fill it out. Sounds good.

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