

YOUTH ACTIVISM

With

Ms. Megan Easterling:

This is an interview for the Youth Activists Archive at Duke University. The interview is with Ms. Megan Easterling and is taking place on November 11, 2021, over zoom. The interviewer is Ms. Lauren Relaford. Megan Easterling is a young activist who channels her creativity, passions, and experience into her works of art. Her activism is focused within the movement for Black lives.

LAURENRELAford: Hi how are you?

MEGANEASTERLING: Hello.

RELAford: I'm Lauren RELAFORD, nice to meet you face to face.

EASTERLING: Nice to meet you too.

RELAford: So just a reminder, this meeting will be recorded, and we'll be using this (visual recording) along with a written transcript for the archive. I just want to set some norms and expectations before we get started. Of course, the interview will be recorded and then after our time together I'll send you a file and if there's any material that you would like to be omitted from the final version, just let me know. We will meet that request and given the zoom platform if you need to take a break for water or use the restroom or just need a moment to pause. Let me know, we can pause the recording or just pause in general. I will remain unmuted for the duration of the interview, and I'll just type some notes as we talk. So please don't let me distract you. And thank you for meeting with me. Are there any questions?

EASTERLING: I don't have any questions.

RELAford: OK, so I didn't say this in the beginning, but of course I go to Duke University and my class "Youth Movements Since 2010," is working on this archive of youth activists, who we don't normally see in mainstream media.¹ We're trying to create an archive that holds youth activists from many fields of work. So, my archive will focus on the Movement for Black Lives and different people's roles within the movement. So, let's just start off with some basic questions. If you could introduce yourself your name, your age, your pronouns, and where do you currently work?

¹ Course title: US Youth Movements Since 2010, taught by Dr. Wesley Hogan at Duke University

EASTERLING: OK, my name is Megan Easterling. I am 27, I'm from Durham NC, and I work part time as a teaching artist at Champion Education in Morrisville.²

RELAFORD: Perfect! Let's talk about that education of aspect. I didn't know that. That's awesome! So, what does a day in your life as a teacher who teaches art? What does that look like?

EASTERLING: Well, I just go have my lesson and just give it to the kids and we paint or draw.

RELAFORD: OK cool, let's see, how did you become an artist? How did you know this is the career path that you wanted to take?

EASTERLING: I don't know. After high school I took some classes. I went to Louisburg College before going to North Carolina Central, and I took an art class there. That's when I got my passion for it. Before I had thought about interior design, I always wanted to do something creative.

RELAFORD: How did going to a HBCU form your art or your focus?

EASTERLING: I guess with the subject matter of what I choose to talk about in my work.

RELAFORD: OK, given that the path of being an artist is an untraditional career path, how did you muster the courage to go into that career?

EASTERLING: I don't know, I guess I wouldn't really see it as too courageous for me. I don't think about traditional things. I just do what makes me happy.

RELAFORD: So, does your activism and your happiness tie together?

EASTERLING: Yes.

RELAFORD: Next, I kind of want to pivot and talk about your mural in collaboration with the NorthStar Church of Art Mission.³ Could you just tell me about the process of getting involved with that organization and what that organization means to you.

EASTERLING: OK, well, I actually worked with an organization called Art Ain't Innocent.⁴ They were looking for artists to express their feelings after the George Floyd incident in downtown Durham and I volunteered, and I created my mural.

² Champion Education "serves students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds united with a desire to enhance young students' multicultural understanding and promote Chinese language proficiency." <https://www.championlearningacademy.com/about-cla.html>

³ A section of their mission: "WE BELIEVE THAT NORTHSTAR IS A NEXUS FOR THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT AND DURHAM'S CREATIVE COMMUNITY." <https://www.northstardurham.com>

⁴ Art Ain't Innocent is a self-proclaimed "a gathering space for artists, organizers, and advocates working together to create and discuss equitable and sustainable art spaces, opportunities, and practices in Durham." <https://www.facebook.com/groups/artaintinnocent/about>

RELAFORD: And what does that mural mean?⁵ Could you point out some of those key aspects like the figure falling through the flag?

EASTERLING: Yeah, it's kind of like the figure is woven into the flag. So, it has to do with intersectionality and the othering of not just Black bodies, but marginalized, vulnerable, oppressed people.

RELAFORD: That piece about Black bodies is really intriguing. What about Black bodies did it say? Was it asking questions about how people profit off of Black pain and Black bodies? What was the meaning of that?

EASTERLING: Well, yeah. So, for me the painting is about how we as the others—whiteness is a construct—meaning it could be trans it could be any person of color, poor, whatever. We are also a part of this nation: America. That's what it was representing. Can you ask the question again, I'm sorry?

RELAFORD: Oh no. It's just this token of we can't be forgotten. We are in the foundation of America.

EASTERLING: Yeah, yeah, yeah, we are here.

RELAFORD: That's awesome! Can you describe your experience in creating this piece? And of course, after the aftermath of George Floyd's death, was there a healing process involved? Or anger or what emotions were you feeling?

EASTERLING: I think all of the emotions, but mostly sadness and anger but also in making the work, there was a bit of —maybe not the right word—but hope for something better. Just releasing that emotion made me feel better or expressing that.

RELAFORD: Along with you feeling that released from creating this piece of art, did you come into contact with anyone who viewed the art and felt this kind of release or this kind of state of mutual understanding?

EASTERLING: Yeah, yep.

RELAFORD: Do you know where the mural was placed and is there any significance with the placement of the mural?

EASTERLING: When the mural went up initially?

RELAFORD: yes. [affirming head nod]

⁵ The mural, “Black Lives Matter,” was created by Ms. Easterling and was hung in the summer of 2020 in downtown Durham. It can be viewed at: <https://nasher.duke.edu/stories/northstar-church-of-the-arts-downtown-durham-mural-project/>

EASTERLING: Yeah, it went to downtown Durham, near Beyu Caffé, near the bakery downtown.⁶

RELAFord: OK.

ESTERLING: I'm not sure about the significance besides, it's in the center of Durham.

RELAFord: And [indiscernible] people watch it. It forces people to come in contact with it.

EASTERLING: Yeah. Oh sorry,

RELAFord: [Interrupts] Oh no, you go ahead.

EASTERLING: I was just going to say now it's currently at the North Carolina History Museum. They're going to have a section for Black Lives Matter.

RELAFord: Ooooo cool. How did your role as an artist change your position or perspective on the movement for Black lives?

EASTERLING: Can you rephrase?

RELAFord: Sure. Being an artist in this time of communal grief, communal sorrows, communal anger, how did your role as an artist change your perspective? Did you feel more included because you were able to express your feelings on a public platform? Did you feel kind of excluded because not everyone is an artist? What was your position as an artist during this time?

EASTERLING: I felt more a part of what was happening. I felt more included.

RELAFord: Was that like a moment where you were like, "I'm in this I'm going to create our create art for this mission, at this moment?" Or has it always been a focal point of your work to focus on Black lives and focus on Black experience?

EASTERLING: I was going to say even outside of me being an artist, I'm a Black woman. So, I've always felt included but being included into having a voice in the conversation is how my art played a role. But anything I create is going to be a part of that conversation and narrative because I am Black.

RELAFord: Do you remember a moment from your early childhood or early adult years where you knew this was meant for you? Where you knew that your art spoke to people and your art express what you were feeling? Was there a moment? Or a story that you can tell?

EASTERLING: No, I can't think of one.

RELAFord: OK, no worries. What does Black Lives Matter mean to you at this moment?

EASTERLING: For me it's a statement of I'm here. I matter, I am, my life matters.

⁶ Beyu Caffé is a Black owned coffee house located at 341 W Main St, Durham, NC 27701. <https://beyucaffe.com/>

RELAFORD: How do you interweave this perspective within your everyday life? With working with children or just going out to eat? How do you get people to pay attention?

EASTERLING: Pay attention to?

RELAFORD: To saying you matter and making sure people acknowledge you and what you believe in.

EASTERLING: I guess simply showing up and not being afraid to speak up or express how you feel.

RELAFORD: Has art been that outlook that's made it not easier, a different route instead of using like your voice?

EASTERLING: For me it is easier because I am kind of like socially anxious or awkward so it's much easier.

RELAFORD: Do you commission pieces for people for them to buy?

EASTERLING: Yes, yeah.

RELAFORD: What does the demographic of those consumers look like normally?

EASTERLING: Uhm, usually Black and brown people between early 20s sometimes later like 50s something.

RELAFORD: Yeah, OK, cool. When you're going into a process of commissioning work, is it more of what inspires you at that moment and then you put it up for sale? Or more of you get information from the customer and then you create what they're envisioning?

EASTERLING: Yeah, so it's the second where it's they tell me what they want, I make it.

RELAFORD: Do you find any like creativity diminished in that or do you find it empowering in a sense?

EASTERLING: It's hard to say because I have to think harder about it because I had to do more research into making sure I'm giving the person what they want versus like "Oh I can just come up with something by myself." Yes and no.

RELAFORD: Yeah. Let's see, I'm going to shift a little bit. How do you define your activism and when do you believe it started?

EASTERLING: Once I started learning more history, so when I first entered college. I did more research and I wanted to have a voice.

RELAFORD: Yeah. I feel the same way being in college. We learn the basics-ish in school.

EASTERLING: Yeah.

RELAFORD: And then you get to college, you're like, "whoa! I know I'm Black, but I didn't know how deep it went." So that for me has also been a great resource in being in college. Being able to indulge in those resources.

How do you feel that? Of course, Black people have that experience of wanting to learn more about our culture, wanting to learn more about history. How do you feel other races have either not done the same or how other races aren't really doing that deep dive into a history that's so integral in in America?

EASTERLING: Wait, can you say that again, I'm sorry.

RELAFORD: Yeah sorry, it was a long question. How do you feel about other races not wanting to learn more about Black history beyond the three people we learn about during Black History Month?

RELAFORD: Or what would you say to them? Maybe that's a better.

EASTERLING: I don't know. I was just also thinking because I have let LatinX friends who don't even know about their own history even. It's just so whitewashed in general. So, I mean, to a certain extent, yes, it is sad, it's disheartening, but at the same time, if they're also trying to learn about their own history, you know?

RELAFORD: Yeah. Learning about our own history, there's been a part of African American history that's been lost. After slavery and of course moving into the Civil Rights Movement, there was a part of that which was destroyed because we weren't meant to survive; this idea that Black people were a momentary thing.

EASTERLING: Mhm.

RELAFORD: In this moment of centralizing Black voices, of centralizing Black pain, of Black joy, how does your art speak to that? Do you make it a mission within creating art pieces to focus on the different identities and different sects and different emotions that Black people have?

EASTERLING: I do dabble in; it's called genre art. Where it's just an everyday sort of piece where like Black people are just existing.

RELAFORD: Just existing, could you define that?

EASTERLING: Well, I'm going to eat dinner with my grandma or going fishing with my grandpa, you can make some art about that.

RELAFORD: So just that idea that we can be, that our normal is enough and we aren't this one face, one faceted people. Yeah, that's powerful.

RELAFORD: I was looking over your Instagram in preparation for our interview and it seems like there's a particular genre of drawing or art. It kind of looks like animation at least to me. You tell me a bit about that?

EASTERLING: Yeah, so what I've recently been working on Instagram is I've been dabbling in—Sorry—

RELADFORD: No, you're fine.

Easterling: a little digital art. I've been using Procreate and just practicing doing some more character design, but also implementing that same genre of just existing while Black.⁷ But also more centered in self-reflection of myself because a lot of it's just like me.

RELAFORD: Yeah. What have the reactions to this type of art been like?

EASTERLING: It's pretty good, yeah.

RELAFORD: I've never seen anything like it, so I was really intrigued because I've never seen, especially like colored people, in that type of style of drawing. I thought that was really cool.

EASTERLING: Thanks.

RELAFORD: Of course, let's see where should go? What has it been like educating other young Black artists? What power/inspiration has that given you in your own line of work.

EASTERLING: Can you rephrase again, I'm sorry.

RELAFORD: No. You're fine.

EASTERLING: [indiscernible]

RELAFORD: What has working with young Black artists done for you?

EASTERLING: Done for me, in which way?

RELAFORD: In the sense of your art, your activism, or your growth as a person.

EASTERLING: Working with younger people is inspiring. Yeah, it's just inspired me to continue to learn and do more research.

RELAFORD: Do you have any stories with working with young people that you would like to share?

EASTERLING: No, not that I can think of.

RELAFORD: Let's see, what would you say to young Black artists who are wanting to enter this movement?

EASTERLING: I say, do it. Make sure that you're doing your research when you speak, make sure, yeah, do the research and do it.

RELAFORD: What does doing that research look like?

EASTERLING: Talking to other people, reading, stuff like that.

⁷ Procreate is an app dedicated to sketching, drawing, and creative thoughts available for devices with IOS software.

RELAFord: So, when you have an art piece or you prepare to speak, what does that look like? Of course, it's a mixture of speaking from your own experience, but do you incorporate others into your work or into what you have to say?

EASTERLING: I'm always collaborating, just going back and forth, making sure that what I'm saying is understood properly. Yeah, because even with the mural I was talking to my brother about how I should depict what I was trying to say. We had a conversation about it not being this image of violence because that's usually what we see. When people make art about like trauma, you don't really need to see the trauma to understand it. That sort of thing.

RELAFord: That's powerful. That relates a lot to what we're learning. We've been talking about, in my "Human Rights on Camera," class about this idea that we're getting desensitized to the violence against people because we see it in every sect of our lives.⁸ On Instagram, in art museums, on the way home, in the bus, we see it in every part of our lives. So, is it a mission in your art to get away from that?

EASTERLING: Yes.

RELAFord: Do you think art is essential to the movement?

EASTERLING: I think art is essential in general.

RELAFord: Could you tell me a little bit more about that, like without art, what would your life look like?

EASTERLING: Nothing, without art I don't think it would be very good. I see art as everything.

RELAFord: What would you call your most inspirational piece that you've created? And can you tell me the story of how it came to be and what the process was like?

EASTERLING: Inspirational to me or like

RELAFord: Yeah, inspirational to you and then the next question will be inspirational to your audience.

EASTERLING: I don't know. I'm thinking.

RELAFord: Yeah, no, take your time to think.

EASTERLING: I can't think of like a single piece. It's kind of like in the moment, sort of situation, where each thing I create inspires me to do something else or to be or to think in some sort of way. Everything inspires me that I do. I guess the piece that we're talking about with the mural has been the most inspirational for the viewers.

RELAFord: What has been their responses to that piece, like Instagram or just conversations.

EASTERLING: People ask questions about what it means. They tell me what they see when they look at it, that they like it and how it made them feel.

⁸ Human Rights on Camera is a class offered at Duke University.

RELAFord: What have the people who have taken interest in this piece looked like? Has it been mostly brown and Black people? Has it been everyone?

EASTERLING: Everyone.

RELAFord: What's been the power of that since you mostly like commissioned pieces for Black and brown people? What's been the power of having an audience that needs to hear this message more than a lot of people?

EASTERLING: Yeah. It felt good that like everybody could relate or understand what was going on.

RELAFord: Is there any art that you don't share with an audience, that you just make for yourself?

EASTERLING: Yeah. Sometimes I do like embroidery.

RELAFord: Oooo

EASTERLING: I also sculpt but haven't had the space, but I still practice here and there.

RELAFord: What is your family's response to your art been so far?

EASTERLING: Pretty good. They you know they encourage me. They buy me supplies.

RELAFord: That's awesome, that's awesome. I know that isn't a common thing in our community.

EASTERLING: No, it's not.

RELAFord: So, have you had any friends that have like had the opposite of that, that you've had to support, or just give love to?

EASTERLING: No, not anyone in my inner circle, but I know there's people. Yeah, most people that I know, they get the support they need.

RELAFord: Where do you see yourself and your art in the next five years?

EASTERLING: I'm hoping to apply to grad school, get in somewhere, and hopefully continue teaching to underprivileged children about art and critical thinking and research.

RELAFord: Awesome, I don't think I had a lot of art teachers growing up, who knew what I was going through or could relate. Given that art is such a reflection-based craft and skill that requires a lot of emotion, you need someone you can trust.

EASTERLING: yeah.

RELAFord: How do you view yourself as that person that students are able to confide and trust? That's a big role within someone's life.

EASTERLING: Say that again, I'm sorry.

RELAFFORD: No, you're fine, how has the role of being someone that your students can trust impacted you?

EASTERLING: It makes me feel good that they can trust me and talk to me about their issues and that I'm able to understand them. Yeah, and even if I may not be able to understand them completely, they know that I am still going to listen and research. So, I can help them in some way.

RELAFFORD: It's taking that extra step that really makes an impact. What is the importance of art education in predominantly underprivileged, minority schools look like? What is the importance of that?

EASTERLING: I think it's very important because a lot of times in those schools, it's mostly focused on math and reading. And then the extracurriculars are just sports. Which is fine, but where art into play I think it does allow for more critical thinking and opinion and expression. Because why is it that you have to wait until you get to college to express yourself and how you feel about things?

RELAFFORD: I think, that just rung a bell, that incorporates like Black people, people of color are not one faceted. We need to explore that creative side because that's innate in our need to be human: to show emotion, to relate to, to love, that's key to that. If we don't focus on that our kids will not have that connection to art and will lose some of that emotion, that they could have had.

EASTERLING: Yeah.

RELAFFORD: Are the teachers you work with majority minority as well?

EASTERLING: No, I would say.

RELAFFORD: What's the impact of that? I guess you have to collaborate on lesson plans, I don't really know how that goes. How does that work?

EASTERLING: The school that I'm at right now, it's like a special interest so the kids come on the weekends or after school. They learn Mandarin, martial arts, all different sorts of arts. So, it's not too much collaboration and I work with the younger children. It's set apart in age groups. So, I work with the younger kids. It's been OK. They're nice.

RELAFFORD: Is your inner circle mostly artists?

EASTERLING: I think so, yeah, for the most part. I mean I have my close friends from high school, they're not artists.

RELAFFORD: What's been the impact of being surrounded if not in your most inner circle and your kind of outer inner circle? What's been the impact of like being surrounded by other artists and like your creative endeavors?

EASTERLING: They also inspire me to keep going with my craft. Just looking at their achievements and what they're doing and thinking, "Alright, cool I need to keep doing it."

RELAFFORD: So, it's not competition, but healthy motivation.

EASTERLING: Yeah.

RELAFFORD: Are there any places in Durham where you feel the movement is most alive? Or in North Carolina? I shouldn't just say Durham.

EASTERLING: I think it's alive everywhere. I would say particularly in Durham, since it is a mostly Black city.

RELAFFORD: So, it's like those city centers that have the most liveliness?

EASTERLING: Mhm.

RELAFFORD: Did you participate in any of the Black Lives Matter protests?

EASTERLING: Not in 2020 or nothing like that.

RELAFFORD: I just mean ever.

EASTERLING: Well yeah, so my brother was a part of the Black Lives Matter and Fight for \$15 so I've been to like one or two with them.

RELAFFORD: What is the Fight for 15?

EASTERLING: Of raising the minimum wage to \$15

RELAFFORD: OK. What was your experience in those protests? Did you feel more emboldened, more motivated? Did you see any I guess behaviors that sparked interest?

EASTERLING: I've only went to one or two. I didn't personally see anything that was like super outrageous. But I did feel more like...

RELAFFORD: Liberated? More like I'm wanting to take this on.

EASTERLING: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

RELAFFORD: I went to a protest this summer and was a high school senior. It was a great experience to march and walk alongside my fellow people who believed in Black Lives Matter. But it was also wasn't what media had said it had been. They put out this narrative that Black people were destroying things and sort of animalistic which I don't vibe with. So, being a part of it, first-hand experience, that's not what it was about at all. We might have said a few "F*** Trump" a few times, but it wasn't like a mad angry protest. It was a protest to be communally involved and to acknowledge that the feelings that we're all feeling are valid. Do you remember any of those emotions coming up or have any experience?

EASTERLING: Yeah, so same thing. I agree with what you're saying. I was thinking about like my brother and their experience. They've seen a lot more because they were like traveling with the protests. A lot more like stuff happens because sometimes it's not this big thing, but other times it can escalate because of the police or other people coming in and inciting stuff, you know?

RELAFORD: Do you believe most of the negatives that happen, specifically in protests, are not by the protesters themselves?

EASTERLING: No, I think most of the time like protests are started just to show awareness, to get a mass group of people and make a statement that all of these people, have the same feelings. So, look at us. We are here, we're talking about it and then people get upset because, "Oh, you're blocking traffic or blah, blah, blah, you're making a scene." And then they come in (police) and they're angry and then a scene actually happens.

RELAFORD: Going along this path of like 2020 and Covid, Black Lives Matter, Trump, 2020 was a year. Can you tell me about your experience as an artist and as a teacher when Trump got elected, how did you feel? I mean, if you are along that side, that's cool, not putting any judgment. How did you feel?

EASTERLING: When he first got elected, I was really sad, kind of scared because all this stuff that he had been talking about.

RELAFORD: Yeah, I definitely remember that day. I was still in school, so it was a day. The teachers were destroyed. The students were destroyed.

EASTERLING: Yeah.

RELAFORD: Everyone was just walking around like something in America had died.

EASTERLING: Yeah.

RELAFORD: We didn't know yet what it was, but it was something.

EASTERLING: Exactly, like if this guy can be president, that's sad.

RELAFORD: The standards of what America stands for and what we will take as President have declined like.

EASTERLING: Right.

RELAFORD: It was just like this moment of the opposite of unity. It didn't feel right. This position that is supposed to be the unifier of our people, of the military, of the common worker, of immigrants, this person who's supposed to be leading us. Is a person that we've seen with the history that doesn't respect other cultures in other traditions, but yet that still is promoted, or that still is valid in some sense because they got elected, you know?

EASTERLING: Right. And I mean, there's some extent like that's not to say the other presidents weren't in the same sense, but it's just the fact that he was so outwardly and obviously like that. And they're like, "It's OK. We're going to take him." It's very strange.

RELAFORD: And who was saying "that's ok, we're going to take him," in your opinion?

EASTERLING: I guess just like...

RELAFORD: There's no shame, you know.

EASTERLING: Well, I guess for me, like obviously a lot of conservative people are people who are very into capitalistic ideas, white people in general just being racist. But yeah, like when I see a lot of Black and brown people, pro Trump, it's mostly coming from either "I'm super religious and I'm like very into capital and money."

RELAFord: Have you seen any changes in the past year since Biden has been elected that have been positive or are we still in this standstill?

EASTERLING: I don't know. I'm not sure. I guess like there's hope somewhat, but I still feel like kind of the same old thing.

RELAFord: (interrupts) Yeah, did your art take turn? Oh sorry, go ahead, go ahead.

EASTERLING: He initially was talking about this backtracking and was like "never mind I was just kidding."

RELAFord: Did you see your art take a turnover the past two years? Not a turn for the bad, but just a shift in focus?

EASTERLING: I guess to an extent. I guess because it's been a year, 2020. Though I'm mostly trying to just maintain my mental health and everything. Just trying to take a breather.

RELAFord: DO you feel like it's different from other people because you're taking a breather from art? Which is your line of work but also your passion Of course we all need breaks, but do you feel like it's different than other people taking a break from their nine to five? I'm going to be a lawyer job or whatever?

EASTERLING: Yeah, I think so because it's what I do for fun.

RELAFord: Yeah. Do you have to like force yourself to be like "I'm not going to touch my brushes or my pencil for the next hour." What does that look like for you?

EASTERLING: No, so I ended up just taking up like roller skating.

RELAFord: Oh yeah, that's gotten really popular.

EASTERLING: Yeah, so I've been doing that occasionally. I may journal or try to just occasionally write. I look at other forms of art for inspiration and I may I write an idea down for something that I want to do in the future.

RELAFord: Let me look at my question list. Have you ever experienced hate or racism from your works of art?

EASTERLING: No.

RELAFord: Well, that's good.

EASTERLING: Yes.

RELAFord: If you had to say one thing about your art as a whole, what would you want people to know about it?

EASTERLING: Hmm

REALFORD: And take your time.

EASTERLING: I would want people to learn about me through my work. Just look at it and there's my biography or something, you know?

RELAford: That's interesting, that's cool, to know you. Do you have any comparable expression besides art that gives you that release? Or is it art that's a different dimension when you when you create?

EASTERLING: Yeah. I think art is different dimension.

RELAford: I know, I am in choir, and I sing. That's my outlet. I know there's this moment where I close my eyes and everything else fades.

EASTERLING: Yeah.

RELAford: Is there anything like that when you create? Could you describe in story or experience where you felt in tune?

EASTERLING: Yeah, well, most of the time. If I'm like drawing or anything, I'll just put on my headphones, and I'm just super zoned out. Like in that movie, I can't think of the name. I think Jon Batiste was in it or it is on Disney, you know what I'm talking about?⁹

RELAford: Was it *Soul*?¹⁰

EASTERLING: Yeah, *Soul*.

RELAford: Yeah, that was such a good movie, but it had a lot of deep stuff for like a kid to understand. Like this guy dies goes to Heaven, his soul is in purgatory kind of. It was a really weird movie but good.

EASTERLING: Yeah.

RELAford: Do you view that there's an importance of seeing Black people in mainstream media, in a lot of different areas of life? What's the importance of that?

EASTERLING: I think it's very important because we are multifaceted. Like we're not all the same.

RELAford: How do you feel about Black, young people seeing people that look like them? That are successful, that are not second, third, fourth choice but first choice. What is your experience with that when you were younger or what is has that meant in your life?

EASTERLING: I'll start by saying it's a good thing to see. For me personally, I don't know how explain it, I don't really think about those things. For me it doesn't really so much matter.

⁹ Jon Batiste is an American musician, who sung the feature song for the movie *Soul*.

¹⁰ *Soul* is a movie produced by Disney which narrates the story of a Black jazz musician.

REALFORD: We can take a second, there's no pressure.

EASTERLING: Yeah, I guess.

REALFORD: I want to hear what do you want to say?

EASTERLING: It doesn't matter to me if I'm second or third or whatever if I have that space. It doesn't make me any less of a person, I don't think. Let's see. I mean it's good to see people in those positions but the people that aren't doesn't make them less. Does that make sense?

REALFORD: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So just to make sure I'm understanding what you're saying. It doesn't matter what hierarchy or like selection that you're picked out, but just that you're seen.

EASTERLING: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

REALFORD: So, visibility. That's what I'm thinking about right now, visibility. Visibility is really important of course, but also, it's hard because I feel as though personally there's this balance of like not being too assertive, but also not being a pushover, or not saying anything. So how do you find that balance?

EASTERLING: Uh, I struggle.

REALFORD: Or difficulty with that balance?

EASTERLING: Yeah, so I struggle as far as like outside of my art. Navigating in the world, I struggle with that. Like just speaking up and not being seen as like "oh the angry Black woman." I have a really soft voice. And oftentimes overlooked, and stuff like that, but it's something I'm working on.

REALFORD: It's a difficult subject to talk about. Can you tell me a story where you knew you had to speak up or speak out?

EASTERLING: I don't know. As far as advocating for myself.

REALFORD: For yourself or someone else, whatever route you want to take this.

EASTERLING: Huh, I guess.

REALFORD: You mean for students?

EASTERLING: Yeah, trying to think, I'm sorry.

REALFORD: No, don't be sorry at all. This is what this is about. We have got to take moments to think.

EASTERLING: I think for me the main thing I'm thinking about is for my brother like advocating for them because they are not nonbinary. Like with our family, just making sure that like they're respected and stuff like that, like speaking up for them in that way.

REALFORD: Yeah, that's very important. So, you're an activist with your art. You're an ally with LGBTQ+ community. How do you balance it all?

EASTERLING: I don't know. (Laughter)

RELAFORD: That's a lot of weight to have. I mean to speak up and speak out for many groups of people or intersections of where all our identities come together. That's a burden to be in an ally. It's not a burden, it's a weight that we take on and we want to, but of course it's work. How do you balance that?

EASTERLING: I don't know like. I don't see any other option. If I didn't say anything, it would be more on me. I wouldn't feel good if I didn't say anything.

RELAFORD: Definitely agree with that. What else do you do besides speak up for the people you love?

EASTERLING: Mhm.

RELAFORD: People we don't even know sometimes, like just speak up. For people in general.

RELAFORD: Is there anything you want the viewers or the readers of this archive to know about you, about the movement for Black lives, or about 2020 and 2021. Is there anything that you would like the viewers to know and to take away from this interview?

EASTERLING: Let me see. Sorry.

RELAFORD: No, don't be sorry.

EASTERLING: I don't know. What else I can tell them about myself besides to look at my work. That, people should continue to do the research because there's always new information coming out, new stuff to learn about and respect and other peoples' identities.

RELAFORD: I have one more question it might be a curveball. What does it mean to be a Black woman in 2021? What struggles have been through? I know it's a big question because I don't know how I would even answer this. Or maybe, what advice would you give?

EASTERLING: There's no one way to be that and to just be yourself. And try to do it without fear.

RELAFORD: Yeah, that's deep. I'm sorry, I was just thinking about that without fear. Self-induced fear, fear of others. That's without fear, wow. Let's see, do you have any more questions for me or anything else?

EASTERLING: Well, can't think of anything.

RELAFORD: OK, let's see. Last question is going to be: where do you see the movement going or growing or shifting?

EASTERLING: I think it's already shifted to outside of just Black people. Also, the intersectionality of like Black people are also gay people or trans people, so yeah.

RELAFORD: Well, thank you Megan. And I'm sorry, I just noticed I spelled your name wrong on the form. My bad completely. I am going to change that when I send it off.

EASTERLING: Yeah, you're fine.

RELAFORD: But thank you so much for meeting with me. This has been great, learned so much. And just to tell you a little bit about what I'm thinking about centering this archive that I've collected. So, I've interviewed an educator, the national teacher of the year in 2019. I've interviewed you. Thank you, an artist in 2021, who's speaking out about Black Lives Matter. And I'll be interviewing a news reporter and college student on Monday. And so, archives should include this idea of different roles within the movement for Black Lives and the power that they've had and what the future is. So that's what that's what the archive will be focusing on. So, thank you so much for meeting with me and have a great rest of your year.

EASTERLING: You too?

RELAFORD: Thanks so much.

[Meeting Ends]

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