

Janine D'Souza Youth Activist Interview Transcript

Janine D'Souza is a student at Dartmouth University who's activist work has centered around her home state of South Carolina where she fights against southern white supremacist institutions.

CARLEY GENSER: I'm in a class called US Youth Movement Since 2010 and we are trying to build up our archives of youth activists¹. We don't really have many things on youth activists from the perspective of youth activists so we just want to be able to put this in the Duke archives so students fifty years from now can look at your interview, find out about what young people were doing in 2021 to improve the world. This is just for education purposes. You are going to have total control over the material. You can read the transcript if you want, edit, take stuff out, whatever you are comfortable with. Is it okay if I email you after the fact if I have any followup questions?

JANINE D'SOUZA: Absolutely.

GENSER: Great. Of course, if you feel uncomfortable with anything I ask, just let me know and we will move on from the topic.

D'SOUZA: Absolutely. Of course.

GENSER: Great. Laurel (Laurel Holley - a mutual friend) mentioned you're an activist in Black Lives Matter, climate change, women's rights. Correct? Or is there any one particular topic right now that you are focusing on?

D'SOUZA: Not particularly. A lot of my activist work has happened from the base of South Carolina. That's where I am originally from. I would say that most of the issues that I have focused on are things that affect people in that community, in a relatively rural, southern, diverse, community. I have focused on health care. I have focused on criminal justice reform. I have focused on Black Lives Matter, voter registration, and civic engagement.

GENSER: That's all amazing things. I imagine it can't be easy in the south to do all of those.

D'SOUZA: No, definitely not.

GENSER: Growing up, who was the most important to you that helped you gain the values that you have or that made you want to fight for justice, and stories are welcome, please. No detail is too small. I want to know everything.

¹ Freshman class within the Envisioning Human Rights Focus Cluster at Duke University in the Documentary Studies department

D'SOUZA: I would really genuinely say that both my parents instilled just a care for other people in me based on the stories they would tell me about their childhoods and growing up in religiously diverse communities in India at a time when there were riots about religion and descrimintaion against religious minorities such as my parents in India. Hearing stories about how just a couple people can truly make a difference by devoting time to organizing and time to make the world a better place, really encouraged me at a young age. But it's not really something I considered seriously for a while. I would say that I really associated activism with politics for too long and I thought that they are too intrinsically linked to one another to have an interest in one without the other. I would say more so that when I started gaining more political consciousness when I was around eight grade is when I started to have a stronger interest in activism, and this is when I would introduce what I would think a lot of youth activists', post 2010, origins are and that would be online. Finding communities of older people online as well as those your age who are discussing these issues of social justice and introducing these concepts was something that was so unique to its time. I was on Tumblr a lot when I was younger, and while that was an experience I don't recommend to most children.

GENSER: Yes!

D'SOUZA: I do think that good things came out of it. I was introduced to so many concepts surrounding racism, and surrounding descrimination that I would otherwise not have gotten access to because I was learning things that were, quite frankly, graduate level concepts.

GENSER: Yes.

D'SOUZA: Though I didn't know it at the time, (indiscernible) really internalized those ideas of justice and of equality. I also grew up in a very, very different environment than what I am surrounded with now. I went to a fundamentalist Christian school for ten years. It is quite a bastion of Christian fundamentalism. Any type of bigotry you can imagine, and all just (indiscernible) in the name of religion, it really took a toll on me growing up. I'd say that my first bits of activism were rebellion against this institution. At the time, I was questioning my own sexuality and rebelled in small ways, inserting any bits of queerness into my just daily interactions with people at the school, even if it was quite dangerous at the time. People could get expelled and sent to conversion therapy. But, it was still an avenue where I knew that I was going to be leaving that school soon and I was very frustrated with it. That was how I started to affect tiny bits of change in a very limited capacity. And I think, looking back at that retrospectively definitely changed a lot of people's minds and opened their consciousness a little bit. People have reached out to me, people from that school have reached out to me and said, "Hey, thanks for being outspoken at the time. It was really helpful," or "I know that you're really interested in activism and politics, can you talk about this issue with me?" I think that has really made a difference and that it will be a couple more discontent people away from crumbling. I would say that those are a lot of the foundational experiences that definitely affected my interest in activism and seeing things first hand, in combination with learning about these concepts online, was my basis.

GENSER: That's amazing! That's such an incredible story. Going back a little bit, were your parents activists in any way or are they now? Or did their upbringing just push you to do the kind of work that you do today?

D'SOUZA: It's more so their upbringing. My parents used to be very politically enthusiastic, but unmotivated people. I had an aunt who worked in Indian politics. She worked for the Indian Congress Party in opposition to the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) Party of India, which is a right wing Hindu nationalist political party²³⁴. And hearing her stories as well, about her work in politics was really inspiring to me, because, to me, I thought she had a really cool job because she would also work with a lot of celebrities and big media people and she would say, to me, "That's all really nice and interesting, but I've never loved anything as much as the political work," and I thought, wow, you're meeting these celebrities, you're meeting these movie stars, and you still care more about politics? That's kind of lame, but down the line, I learned that I sympathize with her a lot more.

GENSER: Tell me more about this aunt. What's she like, things like your relationship with her?

D'SOUZA: It's definitely fluctuated a lot over the years. When I was really little, she was just a complete, cool older sister to me because the age gap between her and I was only about 20 years, so she was still pretty young when I was born and when I was growing up. Unfortunately, she lived in India and now lives in Germany. But a lot of times when I would go and talk to her, I felt really encouraged because I knew that it was possible to have this incredibly cool and loving persona and still do work and still be unmarried and still have this independence about yourself. That really inspired me when I was younger. Now it's, she's very different. She is now a homemaker in rural Germany.

GENSER: Wow!

D'SOUZA: She's lived completely different lives. But it's really nice to talk to her now as well now that I've had some more experience under my belt and she's had some under hers from years ago, granted, but I would say, a lot of the power of transnational organizing and picking up aspects of organizing activism from the work of those in other countries and applying it to your own communities.

² Indian Congress Party is a broadly based political party in India. It was the first modern nationalist movement to emerge in the British Empire in Asia and Africa. Find more information here:

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Indian-National-Congress>

³ Bharatiya Janata Party is one of two major political parties in India, along with the Indian National Congress. It is the current ruling political party of the Republic of India, since 2014. The BJP is a right-wing party with policy reflecting Hindu nationalist positions. Find more information here:

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bharatiya-Janata-Party>

⁴ Hindu nationalist political parties are a series of political parties in India and globally that reflect Hindu nationalist ideals. Find more information here: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/international/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/hindu-nationalist-parties>

GENSER: What communities or what international activism would you say inspired you versus your aunt?

D'SOUZA: For me, I would say a lot of the movements that inspired me when I was younger, have to do with environmental activism due to the international aspect of that, and seeing kids preteens, young teenagers organizing in countries all around the world, and I thought that was incredibly inspiring. And when I was even younger, before, I would say a lot of this climate organizing started to gain traction. My dad was also very supportive of me having a strong background in feminist movements around the world. My dad, I think, probably a lot of other parents out there, really wanted me to idolize Malala Yousafzai⁵. I mean, as I should.

GENSER: Yes!

D'SOUZA: He gave me a lot of books and showed me a lot of articles about her. To him, that was an inspiring story that he wanted me to emulate. Whenever I would go out and buy books, he would always be a little disappointed if I was buying just fiction books, but instead push me to the direction of some type of biography or true story about women, other countries who are resisting in the face of oppression, in the face of discrimination. I remember one of my favorite books when I was younger, was *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana*, which is a true story about a woman living through the first Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and her stories are told through the point of view of a Canadian journalist⁶. And this is a book that I read so many times when I was a kid, because of how much I loved it. And I think that those kinds of backgrounds are really the ways that media inspired me when I was a kid. In a lot of ways, any type of motivation that I've gotten has come from the media because of how interwoven it's been in my life since my youth.

GENSER: Have you read the book in recent years, since high school or beyond?

D'SOUZA: I read the first couple of pages very briefly last summer. I was giving it to a child that I was tutoring.

GENSER: Oh, wow!

⁵ Malala Yousafzai is a young Pakistani activist for female education. She is the youngest person to win a Nobel Peace Prize. She survived being shot in the head by a Taliban gunman and continues to advocate for education for girls. Find more information here: <https://malala.org/malalas-story>

⁶ *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* is a book by Gayle Tzemach Lemmon. The book tells the story of Kamila Sidiqi, a young female entrepreneur working during the years of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Find more information here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dressmaker_of_Khair_Khana

D'SOUZA: I thought it would be a good book for him to start reading because he was in fourth or fifth grade. This is probably a little bit of an advanced reading level, but it's one of my favorites.

GENSER: Yeah.

D'SOUZA: Those are some of my early experiences that led me to grow into the role that I did in my teens. I would say a lot of forms of media around the time that I was growing up are very strong female lead centric pieces. Even if the strong female lead wasn't exactly the lead to the story, they're the ones that I paid the most attention to, whether it was Hermione in Harry Potter or Annabeth Chase in Percy Jackson. Those are the types of female role models that I kind of had growing up.

GENSER: You were a big reader as a child?

D'SOUZA: I was. And regardless of what type of book I was reading, I would always pick out the cool girl in the book, who was doing something that was resisting some type of evil, or bad thing. Those are the kinds of characters that were always my favorite, I guess.

GENSER: It's always the girl in the big group of guys that just stands out and that you're like, I want to root for you.

D'SOUZA: Exactly! Hit me with your next question.

GENSER: I want to go back to your dad, pushing upon you women's rights and being a feminist. Did that surprise you that it came from your dad and not from your mom? Was your mom also involved in that? Can you tell me a little bit about that?

D'SOUZA: I think it's not that my mom wasn't involved in my development of being an activist. It's more so that my dad and my mom had different approaches. My dad was a very nerdy academic type of approach. My mom was more practical, set in stone in your daily life. Am I allowed to swear in this interview?

GENSER: Probably. Go for it.

D'SOUZA: She really instilled, she really instilled a take no shit attitude in me.

GENSER: Yes.

D'SOUZA: And to really stand up for myself and to not let anything or anyone change aspects of myself. And I think that sense of individualism was what strengthened me a lot and that's what my mom gave. And also, she worked a lot when I was younger. She moved to the US not knowing a single person other than my dad, who she also barely knew, and had to make a life for herself here. And, just that in and of itself gave me a lot of strength and a lot

of inspiration moving forward, because it's kind of impossible not to and see her work a lot when I was younger. My mom, when she came to the US, came on a marriage visa, so she was unable to work in the same type of job, the same type of professional job that she did in India, so here she's been working at grocery stores and gas stations and laundromats but being at work with her and seeing her interact with employees and vendors is really another moment where I was seeing somebody who I really admired in charge, and also not taking any slack, or taking any taking any shit really, from anyone. And I think even in a non academic context, my mom would show movies and books that had these leads to just, I would say they were less nerdy books than what my dad might have shown me.

(Indiscernible) impact on my development and some of my early thoughts. I will also add that because I went to this incredibly conservative Christian school that was also quite politically involved, the discussion of politics in school made me very uncomfortable, when I was younger. I didn't know that much when I was younger, but I had mock elections whenever the real presidential elections would occur, and I remember in first grade, it was the 2008 election and there were only two children that voted for Barack Obama. And I was one of them, because my parents told me that they were voting for Obama. And I made the mistake of saying that I was one of the two. And I was getting harassed and bullied. And I voted for Obama, because my mom told me about how much she liked him. This is before my parents were citizens, and before they could vote, and it was very funny retrospectively. But their kind of discussion about politics at home really influenced the way that I saw and interacted with my classmates in school.

GENSER: How did you deal with being bullied about that? I mean I know it was 2008 and you were very young. Was that fourth grade, I believe?

D'SOUZA: First grade and then fifth grade was the 2012 election.

GENSER: Okay.

D'SOUZA: I was gone, thank God, before the 2016 election.

GENSER: Yes, indeed.

D'SOUZA: It was hard. People would come up to me and tell me, "My mommy told me that Barack Obama wants to throw babies in the sewer," and comments made like that. My teachers were also not that much of help, because they had their own political beliefs too, and my six year old self was not compatible with those beliefs. But it wasn't that much of a hindrance when I was younger. It became a lot worse when I was older. But I also had much thicker skin then, and it wasn't so much bullying, it was me getting into arguments and me standing up for myself and my beliefs. It didn't make that much of an impact, but it gave me fuel later on.

GENSER: Did you deal with anything like that in high school or later on and did it maybe discourage you or set you back a little bit and made you rethink it? Was it difficult on you mentally or anything like that?

D'SOUZA: Not too much. I would get the occasional comment about myself that I would hear in the third person. I don't think anything ever said to my face. But of course, they're awful comments. Think about any insult that a woman in the world would be called, it's been said. Usually, they'll throw feminist in front of it as if it's a bad thing. There was another type of fuel when I got to high school that I have gone back and forth about a lot. When I was younger, I was a lot more keen on the idea of leaving, of just going anywhere but the South. My feel was, I don't care what anybody says, they're not going to matter in the next couple of years because I'm going to be gone. And that was an idea that I had a lot before I ended up engaging in actual activism, and actually working and taking direct action in the South.

GENSER: Would you say that change in mindset made you want to stay in the South and change the South instead of just escaping? And how do you feel that you've done that? What are some specific things that you have done that you believe to be significant?

D'SOUZA: Unfortunately, that is a conversation that I sound very hypocritical on because while I do feel like there is an infinite amount of potential in the South, and there are people who are working very hard to make sure that potential can come up. And I worked very hard to make sure that potential could be seen. I'm unfortunately having this call with you in a Starbucks in New England, you can see that I did, in fact, escape. But that had much less to do with my own feelings towards the South, and more so where I wanted to come and get an education. I don't know what the future has in store for me, but I don't feel as closed off to returning to the South as I might have when I was younger. In fact, I feel like it's very much an opportunity for me to take up. Your second question was about anything that has made significant change in the South? I think that organizing power and building up the systems and the basis, and youth activism is, I think, my lasting legacy. For some context or background, it was between my sophomore and junior year of high school, when I was 15, I decided to intern with my local Democratic Party, the Greenville County Democratic Party⁷. And this was right before the 2018 midterms. I wasn't doing anything revolutionary. I was making phone calls, I was knocking on doors, I was registering people to vote all for candidates who, well, lost, and had very generic, Southern democratic politics. But that was still really invigorating at the time, because I was living in a political landscape that was dominated by Donald Trump and dominated by white supremacy and right wing extremism. And any bit of resistance to that is something that I think I was proud of at the time, regardless of how substantive it might have been. But it just gave me a whole lot of energy, as a 15 year old, I guess. And from there, I realized that I wasn't done when this internship was over. I wanted to keep going. I wanted to affect more people. Then I decided to, on a whim on I think, Christmas Eve, I texted the head of the party, and I said, "Is there anything

⁷ The Greenville County Democratic Party is the local branch, located in Greenville, South Carolina, of the state and national Democratic Party. Find more information here: <https://greenvilledemocrats.com>

else I can do? I really want to keep working in this space and with these people.” And she said, “Yes, there's special election coming up for state senate. The candidate is a young woman, a young mother, and we really see potential in her.” I met with her campaign manager very soon after, and became the senior youth coordinator for the campaign recruiting, recruiting young people to come and volunteer, devote some of their time on the weekends to show up, make calls, knock on doors for this candidate. And I think that was really a turning point for me, because it was the first time that I was the one who was calling some of the shots and making decisions and working with other people, and not just political capacity anymore. This was more of a get to know other people event as well, when I would meet these other teenagers who were coming from all parts of the county to help this state senate election and hearing their concern about politics and their views of what they'd like to see in the future was the first bits of power building that I saw in the South because it was in conjunction with this older type of establishment of Southern Democrats, who really loved us as tokens of new activism, and youth being involved in the Democratic Party, and I was thrown on a bunch of newsletters and Facebook posts, but I still don't think that we were really necessarily seeing eye to eye. Obviously, not obviously, but a lot of the kids that I was working with had much more progressive politics, much more left leaning politics than these older individuals. But still, it was a start. And then, by complete chance, right before the election happened, I went out canvassing with an older middle aged man. And this is the first time we'd ever met each other. We were having good conversation, and he said, “Who are you thinking about voting for in 2020 for the primary?” I said, “I really don't know yet.” This is about March 2019.

GENSER: Okay.

D'SOUZA: I said, “I don't know yet. I guess we'll see.” He said, “What do you think about Bernie?” I said, “I really liked Bernie. I really liked him in 2016. And I think that if he runs again, I would consider voting for him.” And then he said, “Would you consider working for him?” And I said, I was a little confused, and he said, “If I were to offer you a paid job to work for him, would you take it? I'm gonna be the state director for his campaign.”

GENSER: Oh my gosh!

D'SOUZA: My little 16 year old self said, “Yes, I absolutely will.” And that, I think, in terms of my development, as an organizer is the biggest change and the biggest turning point ever. And I think most good things came from that campaign.

GENSER: Can you just tell me what happened in that campaign? Any stories, anything specific? What stood out to you?

D'SOUZA: The things that really stood out were how many people I got to know from the campaign. I don't need to tell you that we lost it in the end, but on the way there, we organized our butts off. We were in there every single day, eight to God knows when. People were leaving by 10P.M. People who were really, really (indiscernible) who had jobs, would

quit their jobs for about a year and a half to come and work on the campaign, and would be transported from all different parts of the country to come to South Carolina and work on this campaign, or people who had grown up in South Carolina their entire lives and really, really just wanted to see that change in the state. My circle of co workers, especially the people who are native to South Carolina were getting to build these organizing bases with other working class people who were voting for Bernie. People who came in as regular volunteers for the campaign to phonebank or to canvass are now people who have run for office, and people who are actively engaging in politics who might not have before. This little circle of volunteers and employees, even after the campaign ended, have really, really changed the state of politics in my hometown, and it's incredible. I guess from the campaign I have a lot of different stories. I think one event that really opened my eyes was a Medicare For Y'all event that we had with Senator Nina Turner, current senator Cory Bush, (indiscernible). And these were women who were so so committed to these ideas, and were listening to the stories that people in the audience were telling about how a lack of good health care has taken the lives or destroyed the lives of so many of their loved ones and themselves. And that attentiveness in the room and that genuine compassion should be on the scope of electoral politics. Listening to the concerns of the community is really, really something that was stuck in my mind for a long time. Another day that I remember very distinctly was when my high school was doing a work shadow day where it was encouraging students to not come to school that day, but to instead go to a place of work and observe somebody there. I advertised, "If you guys want to do this day, come observe me at work, and come and volunteer with me on the campaign." And I did get quite a few kids in my high school to come. They came out and phone banked with me, or canvassed with me. Canvassing is going and knocking on doors and telling somebody about a candidate. And that was another example of just building that youth power that was amazing. And these were 14 year olds who were coming out for the first time and doing something because they cared about other people. And I mean, I just thought that it was incredible.

GENSER: Did you follow up with those students that followed you around? Did they continue their work in the school? Did that really make a difference to them? Tell me about that.

D'SOUZA: It's actually been really great, because now I keep in touch with them, and I see them forming these clubs at school that are about human rights and clubs about building this youth power, and continuing this work. And it's so encouraging to see that this wasn't just a one off thing for them, and especially last summer too, seeing them really, really go out of their way to try to communicate with other kids their age these ideas about racial justice and about organizing was so encouraging. I guess another aspect that I forgot to talk about is that for a long time, I was also the president of the local town high school Democrats. I regret a lot of things about that experience. I think that it's not a great way to build power when your structure is so hierarchical. And I think that there was a lot of power climbing involved in that organization when it's that tied to an institution like the Democratic Party. I don't think you're gonna get a lot of meaningful work done. However, I think that the most significant thing about that is growing this base of children who turned into adults now that are really tied

together as a group, and whose ideas have changed and whose activism has also changed supports those developing ideas. But I think during that experience, the most significant thing was how many people we reached and got to come out to an event, or got to come and make some phone calls. And while it started small, I think that those experiences have really given a lot of people perspective.

GENSER: How did you learn from or combat the hierarchical structure of that and take it to the next level and actually push to do real work?

D'SOUZA: I realized during that experience, this was the majority of my senior year of high school, this was also while I was organizing for Bernie Sanders that I can't devote all of my time to being this hierarchical leader. I need to divide power amongst those who are part of this movement and part of the struggle together. And I think allowing people the freedom to speak about what they think are good ideas, and what they think are issues that we need to be focusing on is how we tried to build that, or getting as many people as possible show up to a protest or a rally, organized as a group to show up there was really what I think ended up being more of an equalizing and egalitarian space than it started.

GENSER: That's amazing. That's such an incredible thing to be a part of in high school. I want to circle back to what you mentioned about the town halls and seeing the politicians actually like listening to people in the audience. Do you think that helped you make the distinction between politics and activism? Do you think that played a role in that distinction for you? How did you make the distinction? What was the process like?

D'SOUZA: I would say the distinction came a little later on. This is more of an introduction to this new genre of emerging politicians that I see cross those boundaries. People like Cory Bush and Alexandria Ocasio Cortez who have been organizers and seeing somebody who is going to the border and fighting for families there, or in Ferguson, Missouri being arrested and being injured in protests, or fighting for (indiscernible). Those are all being on the front lines and now being in Congress, and I think that that intersection is what that town hall introduced to me. Later on, I think the distinction between politics and activism was made last summer in 2020 when I think my frustration with established politics just grew more and more, especially in the local levels. Last summer was when there were quite a few protests surrounding Black Lives Matter following the death of George Floyd. And I already had connections to people who were organizing these protests. After the campaign for Bernie Sanders dissolved, a lot of those same people, including my former boss, instead formed a chapter of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)⁸. That became the new group that I started organizing with. And we had a strong contention going into these protests. And while these are mainly millennials and young adults from their late 20s to 30s, I thought that there needed to be more people my age showing up to these events. I would send texts, calls, swipe

⁸ The Democratic Socialists of America are a political and activist organization that fights for reforms that empower working people. This is a national organization but in context, D'Souza and the former Sanders campaign started a local chapter of this larger national organization. Find more information here: <https://www.dsaua.org>

up on people's Instagram stories, any form of performatism that I saw, I instead tried to change that to some type of real action. And I think that while we saw these protests going on, and yet no action being taken in any levels of government, despite these politicians speaking about these issues of racial justice on their social media, is something that really struck a difference. There's one specific incident that I can think about off the top of my head, it's when another local activist who was running for county council brought forth the idea of a citizen oversight board on the Greenville County sheriff's office. This was a board that had to have a lot more citizen involvement, and a lot more oversight over police actions. Instead of considering this avenue, the county council instead came up with an advisory board. These were hand picked by the sheriff's office. Essentially, their friends from the community, people in the community who were already quite sympathetic to the police force, and there was a town hall to discuss these two alternatives and people showed up, people spoke in support of this oversight board and how much we needed an oversight board as opposed to an advisory board. And seeing the apathy from the county council on all of these issues, despite seeing their public comments made about racism in America, and then taking no steps to address that in their home county, when they're quite literally the ones in charge, is what really drew that contrast for me.

GENSER: Seeing things like that, where the police force is picking their friends, things where the people are pushing for change, and others take that and interpret it in their own way and it's not how we envisioned it, do you find that increases your drive that pushes your fight instead of discouraging it?

D'SOUZA: Yes, because it makes me think of how much we need to do outside of government, and how much we need to do outside of these official institutionalized avenues because these institutions are completely infiltrated with white supremacy and there's no way to divorce these two from each other. Building that power and building that capacity outside of these avenues in your own communities and in your own backyard, is where I think more action needs to be placed. Fairly recently (about 2021), there's been a bit of a rebirth of the Black Panther Party in my home state of South Carolina⁹. They call themselves the new Black Panther Party¹⁰. This is completely different from another new Black Panther Party that was quite non inclusive of other racial groups. The party that we've been working with back home in South Carolina is one that is truly just (indiscernible) building community for all those all those who are struggling, all those who are impoverished, all those who are just part of our community and to not rely on institutions like the police, or government to provide those services. That means food drives, that means teaching people life skills, that means helping people find employment, and I think that kind of organizing is really what I'd like to be part of more. I can go back and give some context for this as well. Last August (2020), there was a protest at a confederate monument in downtown Greenville, South

⁹ The Black Panther Party (BPP) is a political organization that was founded to challenge police brutality against African American communities. Find more information here: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Black-Panther-Party>

¹⁰ A local version of the Black Panther Party in South Carolina not associated with other Black Panther Parties under the same name that are non inclusive.

Carolina. And I got a call that I should bring some people there. I obliged, and I brought two other teenagers with me. It was a very, very intense protest hosted by Black Lives Matter upstate South Carolina, the region where they're from. And they were protesting to take down the Confederate monument. However, scores of Confederate wielding, assault rifle wielding, counter protesters showed up. Borderline neo-Nazis showed up. And when we were walking in, I got called racial slurs, ones that didn't apply to me, which is a little bit funny, but it was a bit of an intense experience, standing out there in the sun and having violence threatened at you the entire day, the police force being there, and not doing anything about it. And instead talking to these counter protesters in relatively friendly ways, which should have had several alarm bells going off. And after that, the leader of upstate Black Lives Matter just accepted this could not happen again; this is not the way things are supposed to be done. And after a long winter (winter 2020), we started reorganizing, and he reached out to this burgeoning Black Panther Party and said, "Can you guys show up, protect us since then." And they did. They brought guns as well but this was more for the protection of us and to show that it is possible to have weapons to support a community, so long as people know how to use them and use them responsibly, and don't use them to instigate violence, to instead show those who are instigating violence that we can protect ourselves and we don't need police forces to protect us. That is the context for what ended up happening.

GENSER: Was that scary, showing up with zero protection and seeing these neo-Nazi type people with guns? How did that affect you? How did that impact you?

D'SOUZA: It was terrifying (awkward laughter). It was easily the most intense protest I've been to. I've been to other events like that but this was the one where there was the most amount of backlash. And I would say it would be a lot scarier if I didn't have the community that I know I was with. While we were surrounded by all these people, there were still all these people from DSA and from these various groups who had shown up who were my friends and for people that I have you worked with in the past and organized with and having these six foot tall people come and walk me to my car afterwards to make sure that I'm getting home safe, and when my battery is dead and I need to jumpstart my car, I have somebody there who is so willing to help, because that's what community is. It was scary, but I think it would be a lot worse if there wasn't this capacity building that had gone on beforehand. And I think that's what you need to be prepared for in any scenario to have this supportive group of people there to be there in any scenario. And I think that organizing isn't necessarily just outwards, it can also be within an organization and within a group of people. I guess, since then, I don't recall any other incidents where we've seen counter protesters. And I guess that goes to show that having the support of people there from the Black Panther Party really did help.

GENSER: Did you tell your parents about the counter protesters? And how did they respond? Were they nervous at all for you? Did they discourage you from going out again, after seeing their young daughter in a situation like that?

D'SOUZA: That's a very funny question because I was initially planning on lying to my parents about it. I was initially just planning on being like, "Oh, nothing happened at all. It was just a normal day." But unfortunately, my dad was driving around downtown around the day. He said, "Did you see all those nuts with guns out there? I don't know what they were doing." And I said, "Yeah, they were around the Confederate monument." And my dad said, "Weren't you at the Confederate monument?" And I said, "Yeah," and I think some things clicked in his head because I also had to go and get my car fixed afterwards. He said, "Why was your car so bad in the first place?" And I was trying to tell him it was because it was out in the sun surrounded by a bunch of other cars for one of the hottest days of the summer. Some things clicked in his head. He was very worried at first. My dad is always more worried than my mom when I'm going out to these things. He initially didn't even want him to take an internship with me in politics at all. When I told my mom later, she also responded much more calmly than I expected her to. I was very nervous about it because I thought this is going to be a "you are not going out again" scenario. It was more so that she was so grateful for the community that I was with because she knows my old boss, she knows the people that I worked with and she trusted them when I was 16 and 17 years old and working alone on this campaign, and she's still trust them now when I'm an adult and I'm still showing up to these events. I think it's definitely concerning for them and I think they definitely wish that I had grown up in a place where it was safer time to express these ideas but I think that they're still really proud that I've endured these stories and have these battle stories to tell. When people run into them in public and they asked about me. They tend to ask about, "Oh, how did Janine get into her college?" or "How did Janine study for the standardized tests?" asking all these things and putting down their own children. My parents are always really proud to say that "Yes, she did do all these things academically and what she does outside of that? She organizes, she protests, she goes to these dangerous places. You need to be okay with your children also be involved in these activities if you want them to grow into rounded individuals." I think that they take a bit of pride in me.

GENSER: That's amazing! I can't imagine what that would have been like to have to or want to lie to my parents about such an intense situation but I'm very happy to hear that they were receptive and that they are very proud of you because I would be as a parent; This is incredible work that you're doing. I really like what you said about the battle stories. I like that term that any type of youth activism is a battle, that we are in battle, these things are affecting us.

D'SOUZA: Yeah!

GENSER: I really, really like that term. You mentioned being on Facebook pages and newsletters. What was that like seeing yourself so publicized for these events?

D'SOUZA: It was pretty funny, because I think that I was definitely tokenized a little bit. You have a young daughter of immigrants who grew up in South Carolina, and is now aligning herself with the Democratic Party, it's a good selling point, a good marketing point, but there's quite a few people from that time in my life that I admire, and who I think are still

super committed to creating work, or creating change back home. But if those were the people who were still using my name, and touting me, I don't mind that if it's to engage other youth and activism. And I will also say that I was pretty active in these digital spaces to reach adults, as well. My activism wasn't just limited to encouraging other youth because during the campaign, I would keep posting on any any Facebook page I could find and calling anyone that I knew, and that's still something that I do; I had somebody reach out to me a couple days ago, who was still in high school in South Carolina, saying that she was planning a counter protest to those who are coming to our local abortion clinic to harass those seeking services from them. And she said, "Can you spread the word?" I said, "Of course!" and I went through my same cycle of Facebook pages, and contacted other organizations that I knew. And they had a good showing. It goes to show that sometimes you can inane put this information out there, and there will still be people who will absorb it.

Sorry, I got a little off topic.

GENSER: No, off topic is welcome.

D'SOUZA: It was definitely weird to be tokenized, but there are people who I think genuinely still do admire the type of youth activism and have become more open to the opinions that me and young people can express.

GENSER: What's it like being reached out to? I imagine that's a very interesting, very emotional response to something like that. What's that like?

D'SOUZA: It's kind of nice. It feels like I'm trusted with spreading this information and contacting people. Pretty much anytime that there is a protest thrown by my local chapter of Black Lives Matter, the head of the organization reached out to me personally, and said, "Hope you can make it!" or "Hope you can spread the word about it!" which is really nice to know that I am part of a community like this, where I am trusted, and where people are valued. And I think more so what was really encouraging about this recent event, they reached out to you about this protest with the abortion clinic was that there's still these people who are organizing in my hometown. I was worried that after a couple of people graduated and left, we'd be back at square zero, right? But it goes to show that there still are generations that are just now growing in their capacity as leaders and as activists. And that's super encouraging too.

GENSER: You mentioned building bases in youth activism and it seems that you have helped to establish those bases in your hometown and in your high school and that's incredible.

D'SOUZA: That's the reason why I still feel a little bit of disconnect, and a little bit of regret sometimes about leaving and going to school away from home because the year before me there was another high schooler who did the same thing. He was a lovely person. He did a lot of work with the local Democratic Party and he was the president of the High School Democrats and then around the time that it came to apply to colleges, he got into Harvard, and nobody ever heard from him again. And I guess that's the thing that I really wanted to

avoid. I didn't want to be the person who did not care about anything going on at home once I was gone. That's why I really tried to stay engaged with activism that's still going on back home.

GENSER: Other than posting on social media, spreading the word on those Facebook pages, what are you doing to stay involved at home?

D'SOUZA: I stay in contact with people. I check in every once in a while, message people and say, "Hey, what's going on?" I read the news from home to see are there any protests going on, what is the county council doing. And I think mainly staying in contact with people one-on-one and hearing about what they're doing is what's been super encouraging. It's a little bit of a downtime right now. Things generally, just the way that life is, pick up during election times, even if the work that we're doing isn't tied to electoral politics, it's just a cycle of people getting employed by campaigns again; it encourages more activism. I think hearing about what some of the kids who were still at home are doing is really what's fueling me to stay engaged and to keep hearing about all this stuff. I expect the next year and a half (2021-2022) will probably be filled with a lot more electoral politics, even in the activist spaces that I've been in. The chapter head of upstate Black Lives Matter is now running for state house and I expect that will take up a lot of the time of people who were really organizing with Black Lives Matter. But I guess in addition to that, just before elections as well, something that we do a lot is voter registration. I used to think that this was a really nonsensical activity because I thought this isn't how you're going to create change, you can't vote away your problems. But it's not just that. It's the fact that there are people who are underserved and who aren't reached by official capacities of voting, and not even given the chance to register. And I think reaching those communities is something that's really important, because not only are you building a rapport, based on engaging them to vote and register to vote, you're engaging them in taking action in their community after.

GENSER: Going off of that, when you were canvassing, was it a lot of voter registration things? What was it like to canvass? Did you ever get heckled? Things like that?

D'SOUZA: Quite a bit. I used to go out canvassing alone for a while because I was an employee. Occasionally we get catcalled or something, if you're a 16 year old girl canvassing alone. Canvassing is really how I connected with a lot of people, because it's not just that you drop your flyer and go a lot of the times, it's that you stay around, you engage in conversation, you genuinely want to hear why people care about what they care about. And I think for a while my perspective used to just be selling the candidate, but later it became listening to these concerns. And I think that from that, we've had people come out and volunteer, come out and stay engaged in politics even after things are over. In terms of voter registration, I got really comfortable with voter registration around my senior year of high school. I would go to college campuses, and register college aged voters a lot.

GENSER: Wow!

D'SOUZA: And then after that, I did that in my high school, registered about 80 voters. And then we would go door to door last summer, prior to the 2020 election, but while the pandemic (the COVID-19 pandemic) was going on, that was really complicated, because you want to limit contact, but you also want to get people to vote. You would sometimes just drop off a flyer at some of these doors, you would knock and talk with a mask on. We would just go to communities and drop into random communities and give them flyers. And that was also good. But definitely had issues with canvassing, definitely had the cops called on us and whatnot. But it happens. It's funny when it does. And I guess the only inconvenient thing is whenever we do have younger people with us and you're in those situations, you want to minimize how much these kids have to come into contact with adults, and especially law enforcement. I do feel quite a bit of responsibility whenever I bring anyone who's younger than me to a political event. I'm always super concerned because of bad experiences I've had in the past, surrounding that.

GENSER: Did you find when you were canvassing, going door to door, or maybe even phone banking when you're on the phone, did you find that people weren't receptive to what you were saying because you were so young and how did you combat that?

D'SOUZA: I think on the phone, generally it was okay, but people just are generally not receptive on the phone.

GENSER: Right?

D'SOUZA: But you can't really tell my age too much on there. I think more so when I was in person, it would be more so that you were tokenized a little bit and people would think "Aw, who is this child showing up to my door?" right? But I think the second that we actually started talking, and they heard what I had to say, it was a lot better because I think when you have somebody who's attentively listening to you, which is really what anyone wants, it doesn't matter how old they are. I do think that just in general, a lot of people that I was training to canvass were a lot more market-y (oriented to sell the candidate) than they should have been, and a lot less genuine, so that was a barrier that I always had to overcome at first. And that, I think, had more so to do with my lack of experience, because I still need adults who are like that as well.

GENSER: What kind of things helped you become more genuine in canvassing and less marketing your candidate?

D'SOUZA: I think treating it less as if I need to contact 50 people and more so I need to have one genuine conversation where I genuinely get somebody to believe in this candidate. Because it's one thing to just have half of a conversation and barely interact with 50 people, because you might not really change anyone's mind. And it's another thing to genuinely get another vote.

GENSER: That's amazing. Did you find in these organizations when you were working on the Bernie Sanders campaign, that you were the youngest there, and that you were really the driving force and pulling in other young people?

D'SOUZA: Yes. It depends on the type of young person. There are other people who were recent college grads, who are mainly dealing with college aged voters, or young adults. I was really driving more of this high school presence for those who might not necessarily be able to vote but who 1: have parents who will and 2: will come and volunteer with our campaign. But yes, very much so. I think, had we not been organizing and we I mean, these high schoolers, you would not have this under 18 demographic at all, at any events.

GENSER: That's amazing. When you mentioned Obama when you were in first grade talking about that election, do you find that a lot of the people that you interact with just adopt the politics of their parents? And were you that way? I'm sure you were that way for a part of your childhood. How did you develop your own political ideas beyond those of your family?

D'SOUZA: I would say in a lot of ways when I was younger, my politics were similar to those of my parents, but it was also really influenced by the school that I was in for a long time as well, because I just wanted to fit in there desperately. And I would say that I agreed with that. But I had no idea what I really believed. Then, I think, while my beliefs were the same as my parents for a long time, it wasn't necessarily because of them, it just was a coincidence of being online and realizing that this is what I care about and these are issues that I care about. And I think a lot of the current differences I have politically with my parents emerged because of my work on the campaign, actually. I met a lot of incredible people who introduced me to different ideas. I credit one co-worker, specifically. Their name is Mason. They would talk about leftist theory with me that I was unfamiliar with, and then recommend things that I should be reading. And after taking the time to invest in me like that, I started to develop these different beliefs and realized my work in the future does not lie within the scope of electoral politics within the Democratic Party. That being said, both my parents still did end up voting for Bernie Sanders. They were torn between Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders. I think they both ended up voting for Sanders because they took pity on me. But that's fine (laughter). They're just both very supportive. I have a lot of conversations with my parents regarding politics. When I was younger, I really thought that my mom and I agreed more. I've come to realize that my dad and I probably do, and I have a lot more political discussion with my mom. Last summer (2020), my mom really did not like the concept of defunding the police and abolishing the police and I had to talk to her about that and present her with my perspective. And she still doesn't see eye to eye but she is a lot more understanding.

GENSER: How do you deal with that power dynamic of not only talking with someone older than you but your parents and trying to educate them on your opinions and what you see is right and progressive in the world?

D'SOUZA: I think my parents have a lot of trust in me in general I think because I am a pretty well educated person in a very traditional concept as in "Oh, I go to an Ivy League institution" and my parents see me as the golden child there. They trust my opinion a lot. I don't think that there's that much of a power dynamic truly.

GENSER: That's really interesting. I feel like most families aren't like that. I'm glad that you didn't have to deal with that. You mentioned your coworker, Mason was his name right?

D'SOUZA: Their name - was their name.

GENSER: I apologize.

D'SOUZA: No, you're fine.

GENSER: Can you tell me more about them and how they impacted you?

D'SOUZA: This is going to be really embarrassing, and I'm sorry this is gonna end up in the archives forever.

GENSER: No, I'm really happy about that.

D'SOUZA: I was initially just drawn to them because I was very attracted to them (laughter). But eventually, it became more of a friendship where we were the two youngest people working in that office, and just joking around and having an outlet and talking about our experiences growing up in the same home town (Greenville, SC) it turned into more of a concern of, "Hey, I hope you're not being too influenced by these adults around you who want to exploit your image and exploit your identity. I hope you grow into yourself more." I think that was a really good outlet. I would actively look forward to coming to the office after school and getting to work with Mason.

GENSER: Do you still stay in touch with Mason?

D'SOUZA: They moved to Philadelphia, but I did reach out to them a couple months ago when there was some drama going on surrounding different organizations in my hometown.

GENSER: Can you elaborate on more of the specifics of the Bernie Sanders campaign?

D'SOUZA: Anything specific you would like to know about?

GENSER: Just anything. More stories! I'm really interested in your stories. And also, I realized that we are past an hour. Are you okay timing wise? Let me know if you ever have to go anything like that?

D'SOUZA: I guess maybe I can try to wrap up with this and give you some good details and stories about it.

GENSER: Yes, perfect.

D'SOUZA: I started working in the summer of 2019. It was just me and my boss in the office at the time, because we didn't have many field organizers yet. And then we happened to gain another field organizer whose name is Suleman, a man who went to my old high school and was in the speech debate team that I was in in high school. And we also really bonded at the time; he was a great figure to look forward to. He was another South Asian person who was going to law school and was interested in organizing this community. And I think that he also made a very profound impact on me. Unfortunately, he also quit very early on. But, we went to Colombia, it was an hour and a half away from our hometown, for a meeting with all staff, and on the way there and back the conversations that we had about growing up in the US post 9/11 as South Asian people was a really profound conversation and how we view politics as a result of those experiences. Then I went throughout the rest of the summer, had a great time, and then I still wanted to work while I was in school. Unfortunately, my boss at the time was not super understanding of being a high school senior and work for the campaign. But eventually, he got moved, and I got a new boss who I am still in contact with quite a bit. Her name is Tabitha. She's lovely. She's a young single mom. She's not a single mom anymore. But, really had that experience of being a single mom in the south, and being a teenager when she was a parent. And she really opened my eyes to this kind of poor white experience of living in the south that I was unfamiliar with before. And just realizing how much solidarity can be built up between different people of different racial backgrounds, because of how much we are still exploited by governmental institutions and the rich, and I think that is more solidarity building. But, we had so many different campaign events that went on around that time; we would do debate watch parties, had people come over to watch the debates, we do dinners, potlucks where volunteers would come in and we would talk about canvassing opportunities. I would take 60-70 year old people canvassing with me and in my little Nissan Versa Note, driving so poorly.

GENSER: Oh my gosh.

D'SOUZA: But it was good. I'm really nostalgic for a lot of that time. Sorry, do you think that we could maybe wrap up?

GENSER: Yes, 100%

D'SOUZA: If you want to call any time after this too, that would completely be okay, or if you want to email I'd be totally fine with that.

GENSER: Great, thank you so much. When I go over the interview, I'll probably have some follow up questions.

D'SOUZA: Okay. Sounds good.

GENSER: But thank you so much for meeting with me. It was a big honor. Your story is absolutely inspiring. It's amazing to hear about you and everything that you've done.

D'SOUZA: No worries. I really appreciate you reaching out and again, any follow up questions, please let me know via email.

GENSER: Great, thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

D'SOUZA: Yeah, of course!

GENSER: Have a good rest of your day. Good luck with school and everything.

D'SOUZA: You too. Bye!

GENSER: Bye!

