Emily Sánchez: From the Newark Public Library, this is *Demanding Justice in New Jersey*.

[Introduction music - "We Got To Have Freedom" by the Spirit of Life Ensemble]

This podcast is about local histories of community organizing in the state. I'm your host, Emily Sánchez.

Today, we have the pleasure of hearing from Danielle Walker and Dana Patton. Both Danielle and Dana are part of Jersey City Together (JCT), a broad-based chapter of the New Jersey Together organization. Since its founding in 2016, JCT has trained thousands of Jersey City residents to act on their interests. The organization's three main areas of focus are housing affordability, education, and public safety. Danielle, Dana, and I are going to talk about their experiences organizing on the issues of housing and education within the context of gentrification and displacement in Jersey City.

And, for all our listeners out there, as you tune in, think about the ways you can apply the different strategies Dana and Danielle share today in your own home community.

[Transition music - "Powerful Beat" by Penguin Music]

So now we are going to go to our first official question: So, could you please tell us how long you've been working with Jersey City together and how did you find out about the organization?

Danielle Walker: Okay, so this is Danielle and I have been with Jersey City together since the fall of 2018. I was a parent of a freshman who attended Abraham Lincoln High School in Jersey City. Full disclosure, my daughter, who was a freshman at the time was the, is on autistic spectrum and Lincoln High School was not her homeschool, but in Jersey City, high schoolers have the opportunity to attend whichever high school hosts their SLC. SLC stands for Small Learning Community. My daughter was interested in culinary arts and Lincoln High School provided that as a concentration. I was very nervous about my daughter attending a school that was, I didn't know much about. And so I sought to inserted myself into the PTA meetings. I just wanted to learn more about the culture of the high school and meet parents and other community members, teachers, staff, stakeholders, the school. The principal, Chris Gadsden, wonderful guy, had invited a community leader, well Jersey City Together leader, to one of our PTA meetings and that's how I first heard about them. I was sold as soon as Winston was his name represented Jersey City together, he just started speaking about the work that Jersey City Together is doing and how it relates to the public schools at the time, pushing for full funding, clean water, all of the basics. So I wanted to become involved.

Emily: Dana, could you tell us a bit about when you started working with JC Together and how you found out about them?

Dana Patton: I started, I believe it was 2016. I started actually on the safety committee. I had been involved in a lot of different neighborhood groups and someone who was organizing with Jersey City Together asked to have coffee and said, your name has come up, would you be interested in working with us? And the church that I was attending at the same time was also becoming a member of Jersey City Together, Grace Church downtown. So I was very interested in the idea of organizations pooling their power together. And I loved the fact that Jersey City together always starts with listening. I think that's so important because a lot of times you find organizations that come into a place and try to tell the people what they need or what they should be doing instead of listening to what's already happening there and what residents need and want. So that was very appealing to me that they were doing listening campaigns and they were actually asking people, what do you need? What do you want? What do you want to organize around? And I quickly learned that for me, public safety is so much more about whether or not we're funding our public schools and whether or not we're giving kids what they need as opposed to any other kind of idea about what makes people safe.

Emily: Dana, you mentioned relational organizing and that Jersey City together also did listening campaigns and listens right before acting or deciding how to act on. Could you both elaborate on what those two mean?

Dana: So for me, the listening campaigns are literally you go and knock on doors. Sometimes you go to what they call a house meeting where you've invited people from your neighborhood to come and talk about things. Or it can be that you sit on the playground like I do every day after school and talk to parents and listen to what their concerns are and what their needs are. So listening can be in many different forms. It can be also be surveys, it can be zoom meetings. So any way that you are listening to community members about what their concerns are. And it serves really two purposes. One, you're hearing from people about what their concerns are, but you're also starting to create relationships with people and you're starting to identify people who want to be involved in making their community a better place for everyone to live. And then relational organizing is just really simply that you relate to other people in your community and you start to build a collective power in the more people that get involved. And then also you have to develop a relationship with the people who are, can affect change. You have to develop relationships with, for example, the superintendent of schools or the principals. You have to be able to relate to people just on a human level in order to be able to work with them.

Danielle: I would like to add that one of the slogans that reigns very true with Jersey City Together and the moment I heard it, I just loved it because it puts things into perspective. No permanent enemies, no permanent allies. So things are always changing and what you so, and it's

not about actually sustaining enemies or allies per se, it's just about having people that are in power sort of understand the perspective that's being brought to their attention and challenging them to open their minds and try to change things in their power if they could. And so when you have people that are receptive to that makes them not so, it doesn't make them an ally forever, but if they've gone from being oppositional and now are open to trying to do what they can in their power to make a difference, they're not considered an enemy. Do you know what I mean?

So I think that just having that perspective that sometimes things change, but that's what it's about. Change. Change is good, especially if you have people that are willing to subscribe to changing what the issues are for the better for the community, for the stakeholders, for people to come, kids who aren't born yet but are going to enter the public schools, people who don't live here yet. So it's about just having that awareness and wanting to do something. So we don't declare anyone a permanent enemy or a permanent ally.

Dana: Yes, definitely situational, depending on where they stand on an issue. There can be situations where we are working with someone or we are pressing someone, we are using collective power to press someone to do the right thing.

[Transition music - "Price of Freedom" on Pixabay]

Emily: What are the specific branches of the Jersey City Together organization and which branches do you work on?

Dana: So there's housing, there is education, and then there is criminal justice I think is how it's labeled now, which used to be safe about safety. And Danielle and I both now are in the education. But Danielle, you did some work with housing, right?

Danielle: Yes.

Dana: Do you want to talk about what that was like?

Danielle: Sure. Looking forward to really turning up, ramping up the housing fight because I just recently switched careers and now that I'm sort of privy to a lot of the inequities of housing, it's such a time, like an opportune time to really press our leaders and city officials to change the trajectory of what housing is looking like in Jersey City.

Personally, I started off with the housing team because I live in a development, I live in a complex that is going to be redeveloped and there wasn't much transparency in the beginning about what the next steps were going to be and what the long term situation was going to look

like for a lot of people. To make a long story short, and I'll try to condense this as much as possible. So I reside in a public housing and the way public housing developments have been treated within the last decade here in Jersey City is that there's been a lot of cosmetic surgery, for lack of better words, to sort of change the aesthetic, the way that the projects or the housing build, the public housing buildings look and also try to include more of fair market renters in those areas in the communities, which is not a bad thing at all. But what ended up happening as we've seen in the past is that a lot of people who received subsidies to reside in public housing weren't offered, weren't provided the opportunity to return back to their original sites. So it sort of looked like public housing was treating everyone from all of the different public housing sites as one people and started to transplant them to other sites, which we started seeing internally as a big conflict because there have been circumstances where families were feuding, there was areas that certain people wouldn't or couldn't go into because there was safety issues. And we just didn't like the way that families had to deal with situations without any personal consideration or regard from the public housing, which is also affiliated with the city. Our mayor appoints people who runs the housing authority and they just came in not really understanding the culture and that had became a problem.

So back to what I was saying about a lot of people not having the opportunity to return back to their original sites, it was because the developers had had other about the units that they had made available for people on the lower socioeconomic end. And so a lot of people just were sort of boxed out and it was unfortunate because they've been life really like lifelong residents of those areas and then they weren't able to return.

So what we wanted to do was create a language down at Holland. Once we knew that we were up next and they were going to come and redevelop this property, what we wanted to ascertain was the right to return so that everyone, we have 192 units down here, apartments, everyone would have the right to return after the redevelopment. So we had to create that language. Jersey City together was integral in helping us connect with attorneys who had provided services free of charge for us to get the language. And then we sent that over to the Executive Director of the Jersey City Housing Authority.

There was some pushback in the beginning because I don't think that they were really were prepared on how we were advocating, but ultimately they did decide to have it passed as far as Jersey City Housing Authority, recognizing that we will have the opportunity to return regardless of whatever may come of the development in the future because it is going to be a private developer. It's not going to be public housing from my understanding, but there will be some units that will be dedicated to people who need subsidies to live in this neighborhood.

Emily: And thinking about students who might be seeing things like that happening or public housing or literally plots of land around turning into these big luxury apartment developments … I'm starting to see that in where I live, which is the in Paterson Clifton area, and you see the rent going up. So for students and just people who are thinking about how can we organize to make sure people who have been living here for a really, really long time, how can we make sure that they stay here, they have the possibility of even staying here. Could you give us a little bit more explanation on how that organizing happens on the ground and how can we start to get moving on that?

Danielle: I think that people would have to stay consistent and use their voices and not be deterred by the powers that will try to overtalk them, try to drown them out and not really support what the needs are for the community. You, you'll never have the resources that they have, you'll never have the opportunities, so to speak, to play on the same level because you have these people who are multimillionaires and they have everything at their disposal that we don't, but there's power in numbers. And I would recommend that people just stay press on and to always just use your voice and show up at, get whoever's ear that you need to write letters, attend city council meetings and just continue to press on and just don't be deterred.

You realize the value of your area once you see people who are really that want it that badly. And so for that reason, there should always be an opportunity to compromise and to have these people give the community what it needs. But sometimes that's .. It will be hard to come by if you don't stay persistent. I think so I would definitely just recommend people to just not fold, to just roll over and let developers come in and build luxury housing because that's what it is. It's not housing, it's not affordable housing. It's luxury and you have … you know what … And it goes with, I mean, exercising your right to vote too. I think that it's really important to stay on the ball as far as what these people who want to be elected to council, mayor, whatever capacity, what they stand for. I think it's really important to hold people accountable and just remind them that they're doing public service work for their constituents.

And I'm not above shaming people when they try to switch up once they become elected because that's not what you presented in the beginning. So I think that it's important to turn over the tables and just let people know this is not acceptable. We deserve a space here more likely than not in a lot of areas that are being redeveloped now. Those areas were held, they were what they were because of those people who remained in those areas for so long. And so then you see these developers and other people, they're seeing the value in it. But as you being a permanent resident or a resident of a place for 20 something years, you've seen the value as well. So you can't let people run you out. You have to stay grounded and you have to fight for what you deserve.

Dana: I think too, why Jersey City Together has been so successful is because … for Danielle, if you are organizing within your housing complex, you get together all of those people. But if you can organize multiple housing complexes, if you can have Jersey City together has 30 plus organizations that are religious organizations, civic organizations, neighborhood associations, all different kind nonprofits, when you organized across multiple parts of the city all coming together to support each other, it just makes it so much easier to press people to do the right thing when you have that kind of mass together. And really the truth is that we're all connected because like Danielle was saying, if they're going to push people out of one housing complex, it means people are going to be on a waiting list for another one. And it may mean that people there who lived in that neighborhood all their lives are going to get pushed out of that neighborhood. And instead of individually one by one fighting things if you come together to fight them just makes it so much easier.

Danielle: And I think it's important to understand too, just piggybacking off of what Dana just said, that we're not … people that are wealthier and that are comfortable financially. They're not our enemies. We're going up against a larger, the system that wants us to believe that poor people, poorer people that are less fortunate financially are your enemies or people that are comfortable financially are your enemies, that that's not really the case. It's just the inequities of housing and who people and who developers and who the system chooses to lift up in, who they choose to stomp.

I think that going forward, it's important to speak to people who are not necessarily someone that you would think has something in common with you. And that's why I appreciate relational meetings because you can find a common denominator, you can find something that means just as much to me as it does my next door neighbor who may live in a penthouse. So you find that common denominator and you sort of press forward and you continue to find people who have interests that you would want to support because one day that could be you. So yeah, that's what I appreciate about the organization, Jersey City Together and how they are able to engage people from different walks of life that just because there's always something that you have in common with someone else.

Dana: I've been listening to the *Sum of US* podcasts that Heather McGee has done based on her book, and I recognize so much of what we've been doing in Jersey City Together in it. And every episode really gets you and you end up crying, just listening to how people from different walks of life come together to fight for something for their community because they recognize that we're all connected. And I think that's anything like that is a great resource. Anything that talks about how different people from different walks of life to come together to fight for something that is really in the best interest of all of us because I don't want to live in a place where people can't get their basic needs met where people can't have a safe place to sleep. I mean, I think if

people are genuine, no one wants that, right? So I think what Danielle's saying is really important.

Emily: Going back to Jersey City and the educational branch, and I know both of you were also involved with organizing around like funding, so I wanted to ask if you could tell us a little bit more about the campaigns that Jersey City together has been working on specifically about the schools and any wins that the organization has had.

Dana: Sure, so we started in 2017 and we always again start with listening and the things that we heard are things that we're still focusing on. We heard about classrooms that needed that had physical issues, physical building issues, because the school development authority, the state was really responsible for improving and building new schools in Jersey City because the state had taken over the district. And for decades it didn't matter, Republican or Democrat, the governors failed to fund the SDA and there was all kinds of scandals and mismanagement. And so a lot of our schools' physical buildings had issues. We heard about water. The schools did not have clean water, they could not use the water fountains because there was lead, whether it was lead pipes or lead in the water. All of that had to be addressed. And it had been years that they had known this and it wasn't being addressed.

We heard about teacher shortages, we heard about overcrowded classrooms. And so really all of those things boil down to money. And our district for more than a decade had been underfunded by what the state would say you need per pupil. And we had a district with high needs. We are a district that is about 30,000 kids, more than 80% are kids of color, and most of the kids qualify for free reduced lunch, which is just a kind of fancy data driven way to say that we have kids in poverty, which is in itself a policy failure for our city. But it means that we need more money to give those kids the opportunities that kids in the suburbs might have or kids with more wealth might have. So we recognize that all of these issues are really come down to the funding. So in 2017, we started and we pushed for 5 million more dollars to be allocated, and then the next year we pushed for 12 million more dollars to be allocated.And then the next year we pushed for 50 million and we ended up with almost 200 million more pressing for almost 200 million more dollars to be allocated to our schools in Jersey City.

And as our city has become more wealthy, our tax base, which means the properties here are worth more, and that's a direct result of development and of policies of our city government to invite more wealth here and to have the property property rise in value, that meant the state was going to take away more aid because the state has said, okay, now you can fund your own schools. We're going to take away more of the state aid. So something that we advocated for was to get back some of that state aid during Covid because there was a clause about equity that

states cannot use the Covid money in a way that is going to make things more inequitable. So we were able to advocate to the state to get some of that state funding back.

But ultimately what needs to happen, because this is the way it works in New Jersey, is that we need to sustainably fund our public schools. And the way to do that is through the property taxes. The average across New Jersey is that more than 50% of property taxes go to the schools. When we started our work with Jersey City together in Jersey City, it was like 23% of the property taxes was going towards the public schools. I think we're up to the 40% mark now, but we still are not up to where the kids are really getting the fair share of the wealth that has been invited here. So we've had a lot of success on that front. We have the water situation, we now have, it's, they've put it into three groups of schools. We have Group Two is supposed to be done with getting new water fountains and getting all of the lead removed from the pipes and clean water, clean running water in two groups of schools by the end of this year.

And then we still have that third group of schools that we have pressed to have a deadline for and to have work done. And we have, Jim Nelson is a member of Jersey City Together who literally makes phone calls every single day and is texting people and emailing people every single day on the water. And we've had water actions where we show up and press the district. We have gone to MUA meetings, the Municipal Utility Authority, and press them to do their part because this is a situation that has multiple people who are responsible for this. So we have made a lot of progress on that front too. And it's something that no one was in a hurry to fix, even though here we are and condos are going for a million dollars and our kids don't have clean drinking water, that's not right. That should not exist. So the fact that we have to press on that makes me sad. But the fact that we are doing it and we are making sure that no one forgets that, hey, our kids still cannot drink out of a water fountain at school while all of this luxury development is happening.

So I think there have been a lot of successes. I think we still have a lot to do. We are pressing for more transparency with the district. We are pressing to really create community a two-way communication with the community so that parents and community members, caregivers feel that they are involved and that their opinions matter and that they are part of creating good school climates as opposed to just having one way communication where the district pushes things out to us. So there are other things besides the water and funding that we're working on, and we've been able to develop relationships with the district, and we're still always going back to listening. So we're always going back to have listening campaigns with students, with parents, with teachers, always making sure that we're doing that and making sure that what we're working on is represents the biggest needs.

Danielle: And also empowering these stakeholders to use their voices as well because it's, I think, and Dana, you could correct me if I'm wrong, but as far as I believe the formula for funding schools comes primarily the municipality is responsible for funding schools. So we ..

Dana: It comes from the property taxes. So the property taxes go to the city, the county, and the schools. And what was happening for a long time while we were under the state, the state took over districts, which kids might want to look into that too, because there was a great book by a professor in New Jersey called *Takeover*. And interestingly, even though I'm sure there was corruption everywhere, and I'm sure there was issues everywhere with districts, only really black and brown districts got taken over by the state. So while the state was responsible for the district, they were funding it. And during that time, the city was taking an outsized portion of the property taxes. So the city was really balancing their budget on the backs of kids. So in order for the school district to get their fair share of the pie, that means that the city is going to have to figure out how to either cut their budget or manage their budget with other sources of income. So that's what Danielle's saying is, it's really the city has been taking an outside portion of the property taxes, and in order for the schools to get their portion, that means the city has to figure out another way to keep funding their budgets or to cut back. And they like to blame the schools for an increase in property taxes. But the truth is that the schools were not getting their fair share. Is that what you were saying, Danielle? Does that make sense?

Danielle: Yeah, exactly. So we look to, the local fair share hasn't been provided to the district for so many years, and now that, I guess the valuation, what Jersey City is worth it because it's climbed so high. Jersey City is fully capable of providing the funding that our schools need. But I think that it just doesn't seem to me as if their interest is in our students. It's about just Jersey City becoming a vanity city and just providing people with opportunities to do whatever they want and make Jersey City theirs. As one of the slogans, I'm sorry, was sort of tagged for Jersey City people coming in just trying to get them to come and move, make Jersey City yours. I think that was what the ultimate concern was for our municipality and not really focusing on the kids, which you know, just can't allow that to happen. You know, have to push back on that. So yeah, what Dana said was 100% true, and it's just going forward, it will probably be a continuous point to bring up to everyone who is going to run for a public office here in Jersey City to just question them on the importance of funding the public schools. Because I think that's how we'll be able to weed out people who actually want to invest in kids and those who don't, so to speak. So

Dana: It's a question of who they actually think their constituents. Are your constituents developers or are your constituents the people that live here and that have lived here for a long time?

[Transition music - “Price of Freedom” on Pixabay]

Emily: So I was going to follow up and ask. A common theme is that I'm hearing is: it's really important to ask questions and press people in power and ask you were saying, who are you really representing when we're talking about officials? Who are you really invested in representing? And I think for students who are listening out there, I was wondering too if you could elaborate a little bit more because I think, Dana, you mentioned that for getting potable water in schools, you, Jersey City Together ended up leading water actions and pressing officials. So I was wondering if both of you could maybe add a little bit more or describe to us how does that look? What do these water actions look like and what does it mean to press officials or press people in power to make change happen?

Dana: Sure. So there's a lot of ways to do it, and it depends on your situation and the point you want to get across and who has the power. The first thing you have to figure out is who has the power to actually solve these problems? So for us that you had multiple people who had to be get involved, the city had to pay some towards getting the water fixed, the Municipal Utilities Authority had to pay some to get the water fixed and then the schools had to be willing to work with them to make sure that everything got done. So actions, public actions can look a lot of different things depending on what your goal is. So for us, one of the public actions was we all showed up at an MUA meeting. Now the MUA meeting, the water authority, no one goes to those.

There's a few people who are all appointed people, they're not elected, so they're usually part of what we would call the machine. They're part of the local political machine, they've been appointed. And when you show up to a meeting like that where no one usually shows up to and you bring a lot of people and you're pressing them and you're pointing out on the record that kids here do not have clean water to drink, it makes it more urgent because no one wants to be the person who is making kids not be able to drink water. It's a basic necessity of life. So you have to look at who has the power, you have to look at what is going to get the most attention and to make the most impression and to kind of force their hand to do something about this. So that was one thing that we did.

We showed up that we have had large water actions where we did it at a school and we had the superintendent of school there and we had a lot of parents there and kids there that talked about what is it like when you go through the day and you do not have water, you get headaches, you are feeling sick, you are unable to concentrate. What are all the real life stories of how that affects you directly? It's very important for people to understand, not in just an intellectual way, but in a real way to put a face with what is this doing to people? What is this doing to people's lives? How important is this? When you hear a kid talking about how they get headaches and how they can't get a drink of water and how they're afraid to drink the water where they are, that is meaningful to people that will bring more people into your cause and make people understand

that this is actually an emergency. So public actions can serve a lot of different purposes and it can be very meaningful in holding people accountable and then also making people understand how important an issue is.

Emily: The next question that I have is more about something that both of you have touched on already, but I'm going to ask this to lay it out more explicitly for our listeners. What is the tie between school funding or things like access to potable water and the issue of gentrification and displacement, or what is the relationship between the two?

Dana: I see that a lot of the people that are being invited here to live here are not people who are going to send their kids to public schools here. They are going to move here and it's going to drive up the price of real estate and it's going to drive up the rent. And people who have lived here all their lives are going to get pushed out or their kids are going to be going to a school. And the people who, the new people who have moved here do not see the value in that because they don't have kids or they have kids that they don't send to public school, so they're not going to want their property taxes to increase in order to pay for fully funded public schools.

So I think there's a direct correlation between that, and I don't think that's necessarily new to Jersey City because even many years ago there's a book called *Other People's Children: The Fight for Equitable Education*. It's by Deborah Jaffe, and it talks about the very first Abbott case, which was to make sure that schools are fully funded and that kids get an equitable education. And even back then, a lot of the people who were part of what we would call the machine, the sort of political machine, were people who sent their kids to parochial schools, to Catholic schools to, they weren't sending their kids to the public schools. So the kids that were going to the public schools were often maybe the poorest kids or kids who didn't, whose parents were not, didn't have any political power necessarily. So I think we're still seeing that now where you see that people that are coming in and who are maybe buying a million dollar home either don't have kids and when they do have kids, they move to Maplewood or Montclair or they have kids, but they're paying to send them to a private school. And it's really important to understand that even if that's the case, you're part of a community and you have a responsibility as part of that community for your taxes to go to the good of the community.

No one, none of us are an island. We are part of this community and it's important not just for the sake of school, for public education to be fully funded, but for the sake of democracy honestly, because the attacks on voting rights and the attacks on our democratic process are just another arm of the attacks on public schools. They're all part of the same thing. If we do not have robust public schools, we will not even have a democracy. So if you, it's hard, it makes me crazy that some people would not understand that, how important that is. So I think it's directly tied to issues of gentrification. And I, as a white person who moved here 20 years ago, have to understand what my part in that was too. I moved here and when I moved here, it was totally

affordable to buy a home or for rent. It was not a wealthy place. The neighborhood that I live in was four generations, kind of a middle class neighborhood, very mixed racially and ethnically.

But now there's no way that I could afford to buy a house here. And the people that are moving in the houses are like $800,000 a million dollars. There is definitely, and that's definitely raising the rent here and that's definitely making it so that people who have lived here all their lives, if they don't have rent control, if the rent isn't stabilized, then if something happens to their apartment, they're not going to be able to stay here, they're going to have to leave. And all of that is interconnected.

Danielle: So I'll say this, I've always sort of envisioned Jersey City as what we know of the Gilded Age, right? Because you have this Jersey City has this, if we can give it a personal characteristic, this persona that this is just a great place to live and it has all of this luxury and you're minutes away from the city and basically you have a turnpike or a tunnel that can get you from one city to the next. Our transportation, we can take trains and go to the nearest airport. And so it's just like this city that is a great place to just be. But people who actually live and have seen the changes in Jersey City are able to acknowledge that there are pockets of poverty now and always that have been neglected for so many years. And due to that neglect, you have people who weren't able to really get out of public housing.

You have people who weren't really given the opportunity because a lot of people were just told, okay, this is going to work for you. It's a subsidized environment, you don't have to worry about losing it because then we'll meet you where you are as far as charging you the cheapest rent if you become unemployed. And there wasn't any encouragement or promotion to get people to be self-sufficient. And then what we started to see in these pockets of poverty in certain parts of the city is a real spiral of families being broken apart, generational figures all in one home. And there was the neglect of just figures that could help with children. And then we see a lot of our kids that ended up discontinuing school for whatever reason.

And what's unfortunate is that we don't hear, and we don't, a lot of those families that were disrupted by drugs and just the lack of opportunity and the social justice component, we don't see enough of, we don't hear about enough of those stories to really have it resonate just what Jersey City is because it's not these luxury buildings. Jersey City, even though we talk about it and it's like word vomit to me about these luxury buildings, that's not what Jersey City is. Jersey City is the area, the areas that have working families, working communities, communities that are not doing so well, but it's gilded because it's just this fake gold that is being presented about what Jersey City is basically summed up to be. But when you peel that gold back, you see what the neglect has provided. Well, what the neglect has ultimately made a permanency and a lot of people's lives. And it's insulting, in my opinion, to just continue to push this narrative that a lot of

these wrongs are continuously not being made right. And we have people that are cognizant of that, especially our political figures. But I think that it's in their best interest to continue to have that so that they could continue to have, so they could continue to make fake promises and continue their longevity as the figures that they are. And that's what bugs me about the whole design of Jersey City and what's really not being spoken about. It's a big elephant in the room to me.

Dana: You're right, it's much better for the people in power if people come and live here for a little bit and then move somewhere else. Or if people live here but don't really do anything here, don't get involved here because then they don't have to worry about how they're going to vote. They don't have to worry about that. They might be, try to hold them accountable. Every time someone says, talks about one of the articles that has Jersey City is the most diverse mid-size city in the country, I always want to add, but inequitable because it is, no one talks about that, someone called it window dressing diversity because people like to live somewhere where there's all different kinds of people, but then they don't really care that all those different kinds of people are not living equitably. They're not all benefiting from what's happening here. And Danielle and I are both always involved in community stuff and when I've done, I did a program, a program for food insecure people for 15 years, and most of the people that came there were black and lifelong residents of Jersey City. And they are not benefiting at all from the wealth that has been invited here. And that is wrong. And Danielle's right, it's unconscionable and it makes me sick too. You're right, Danielle.

Emily: Yeah, I know the signs that you guys brought up earlier of make "Jersey City Your Own," and, it's also, even the way that Jersey City is advertised, there are advertisements of Jersey City and like you're saying Danielle, it's gilded in gold. It's not really telling, it definitely doesn't tell the full story. And it's only, it's selling the city as this specific narrative that you guys have been talking about that is, if you peel behind it, as you both mentioned, it is very inequitable. And I feel really glad that I am getting to speak with you both because we see this gentrification and displacement and advertising of cities in New Jersey, that's happening in Newark. And I see that happening also in Paterson. I resonate a lot with what you were both saying, to wrap up my questions too, and I, I'm keeping an eye on the clock and I want to make sure that we finish before seven. This is going to be my last question, and I already mentioned it a little bit before, but I want to mention it again just in case you guys have something else to add. But what advice would you give to students who are trying to make changes in their neighborhoods, in their cities right now and are starting to see displacement and gentrification happen around them? How do you suggest for them to get started?

Danielle: I'm going to say raise hell, but I want Dana to take the reins on this because Dana will make it sound much more pleasant and not so.

Dana: No, I think that's perfect. Yes, raise hell, but don't do it alone. So whatever issue you're experiencing in your city, there's definitely going to be other people who are experiencing the same thing. So talk to people, and it may start with just you and a friend, but eventually you can grow it to be anyone who's experiencing that in your city. Look for organizations that are already organizing around that. If there's an organization that's pushing for rent control laws, if there's an organization that is pushing for school funding, there often are organizations who are doing that work. And it can feel uncomfortable, especially as a young person, maybe to go into a place where there's lots of older people or there's lots of people who've been doing this work for a long time, but don't be intimidated because your experience and your story matters just as much as anyone's.

So look for people who are already doing the work and try to join them. Talk to people in your community who are experiencing the same things. Get together. And I know Jersey City Together is always open to talking to anyone who is trying to organize. And I'm sure that a lot of groups are like that. If you are a person who wants to start organizing, you can talk to people who are already doing it, maybe in another city and see how they've done it and look for resources. You can look for books or podcasts that are talking about that. Like I said, the *Sum of Us*, Heather McGee's podcast was great because she goes to all different cities and looks at how people are organizing, doing exactly relational organizing and how they're doing that and how they're doing it across boundaries of socioeconomics and race and religion and all of those things.

So I applaud you for doing this and thinking about this because I wish to God, I grew up in Florida and went to public schools in Florida, and I look at what's happening there now and it's devastating. And I wish to God that I had known about organizing and how to do this when I was a kid because I feel like I could have been doing this work so much earlier. So I think to any kid who just wants to get involved, thank you. Thank you for caring about your community. Thank you for caring about your neighbors and your friends, and I applaud you and I am so thankful.

Danielle: I would encourage, sorry, all of the youth and people of all ages and stages in life that want to organize, know your audiences because they will vary a little with the younger groups. I think that you all have so much, so many other resources at your disposal and you can reach youth as far as techno, technology, all of the social channels and all of the things that you do to spread awareness. Older people, you know would have to just connect with people that can help you connect with people that may be older than you, younger than you. And as far as other groups that are out here advocating, I think connecting with them no matter what their advocacy, if it's advocacy that's healthy for society and you want to subscribe to that and support them, I think also sharing your cause would cause them to subscribe to what you're trying to do. And so I

think that's a great way to just start forming sort of the Voltron robot, just having all of these similarities, all of these causes just sort of link and support one another.

Yeah, I think that people are always receptive to hear, in my opinion, don't, I've never really been around anyone who, even people who I felt were just really out of touch, just really, really out of touch. Even I'm thinking about one particular person. I remember there was a time a couple of years ago when I had started to speak to this person because this person was giving a lot of pushback and just being a negative Nancy or a negative Nate, I won't release the gender of this person. But either way, just being really negative. And I just remember talking to this person about every time there was a combative statement, I just always brought it back to, it's worth it. It's worth a conversation. It's worth pushing the agenda forward because it's, you have to look at people who are coming behind you. And this work will never have an end date really, in my opinion.I think that it will always have to continue on and problems are going to start to morph into other problems.

So there's always going to be a need for advocacy. So we just have to perfect the approach. And as far as just getting the word out there and staying consistent, because there's always going to be a fight. There's always going to be something down the road and you know, just want to exercise what you do. If they say, as far as physical exercise, if you don't use it, you lose it. And I think that's the same thing with our voice. If you don't lose it, if you don't use it, you lose it. That's the same thing with the need want to advocate. If you don't use it, you lose it. And so, yeah, I'm very hopeful for the Gen Zs and Gen As that that's coming behind us because I think, not to say anything, I really feel like my generation Z is the best, but let you know, just not to.

But I would like to say that I really do admire Gen Z because Gen Z doesn't take no for an answer. It's hard to convince Gen Z what they shouldn't fight for. And I appreciate that. I see a lot of that spunk in my kids and they just don't subscribe to anything that you say. And they feel very passionate and strongly about things and they push until, and it's nothing wrong with disagreeing. I'll never sort of stifle them from me saying, well, I'm the authority and I know better because I don't. And I do welcome their perspectives and their opinions, and sometimes they've convinced me to back down because, and I like empowering them to do so because they're going to need it when they get out here and start to do things for themselves without my oversight. And I'm truly confident that the generations coming after us will do exactly what they need to do and set people straight.

Emily: Thank you so much to you both.

[Outro music - “Powerful Beat” by Penguin Music]

Demanding Justice is a podcast about local histories of community organizing in New Jersey. Many people, like myself, grow up not knowing about local histories of community organizing around social justice. This podcast attempts to change that by exploring stories of migration as well as activism against police violence and gentrification. The next set of episodes will continue to focus on local New Jersey stories of organizing and zoom into the environmental justice struggles in Newark’s Ironbound neighborhood.

If you’d like to learn more about Jersey City Together’s work, check out the show notes. All episode transcripts are located on the Newark Public Library (NPL) website. For educators, you can also access accompanying lesson plans, including worksheets and in-class activities, at the NPL website as well. And to all listeners out there, if you liked what you heard and would like to share this podcast — please do. It is available on all major streaming platforms.

Our (intro) theme music is “Got to Have Freedom” by the Spirit of Life Ensemble. Our transition music is from Pixabay.

Thank you to everyone who made this series possible – everyone part of the HRIC staff, all educators who have given me their time, the staff at the MakerSpace at the Newark Public Library, and the ReachOut Fellowship program. For today’s episode, I send a special thank you to Jersey City Together.

I’m Emily Sánchez, your host for *Demanding Justice in New Jersey*.