

Transcript of Oral History of Zion Smith

Interviewee: Zion Smith

Interviewer: Emily Leiserson

Date: October 18, 2020

Abstract: Zion Smith is an active organizer in the racial justice movement in Indianapolis. He talks about his leading and facilitating Black Lives Matter protests, including occasions when he was tear gassed and threatened. He also talks about the challenges of being queer, Black, and Brown, as well as his experiences working with politicians.

Emily Leiserson 00:04

All right, we are recording. Okay, Zion, thank you so much for being here. I am Emily Leiserson. I'm here with Zion Smith. And we're doing this oral history interview as part of the IUPUI Arts and Humanities Institute's COVID-19 Oral History Project. It is Sunday, October 18, 2020, at 2:40pm. And I'm going to start us off by quickly reviewing the informed consent to get your consent verbally. And then we'll get into the meat of our questions. So this interview is for the COVID-19 Oral History Project, which is associated with the Journal of the Plague Year: A COVID-19 archive. That's the name of the online database. And the COVID-19 Oral History Project is a rapid response oral history focused on archiving the lived experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. And in this particular phase of the project, our research group is focused on collecting oral histories about the experience of racial justice, and racial justice movements, particularly protest movements, in the context of COVID-19. We've designed this project so that professional researchers and the broader public can create and upload their oral histories to an open access and open source database. And the study will help us collect narratives and understandings about COVID-19, as well as help us better understand the impacts of the pandemic over time. So the recordings, demographic information, and transcripts from this will be deposited in the Journal of the Plague Year: A COVID-19. Archive, and the Indiana University Library System for the use of researchers and the general public. Do you have any questions so far?

Zion Smith 02:18

No, I don't.

Emily Leiserson 02:18

Awesome, thank you. So next, taking part in this is completely voluntary, you can choose not to take part or you may leave the study at any time, and leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you're entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in the study will not affect your current or future relations with Indiana University, IUPUI, or the IUPUI Arts and

Humanities Institute. And participating in the project means three things. It means that your interview will be recorded in digital video and/or audio format, and will be transcribed. And two, the recordings and possible transcriptions of the interview, as well as any supplementary documents, if you want to share them, and the informed consent will be deposited in the Journal of the Plague Year: A COVID-19 Archive and the Indiana University Library System to be available to researchers and the general public. And then third, your name and other means of identification will not be confidential. So any questions on that?

Zion Smith 03:39

No.

Emily Leiserson 03:40

Okay. So in addition to the signed informed consent, could you please offer a verbal confirmation that you understand and agree to those terms?

Zion Smith 03:51

Yes, I do understand and agree to those terms.

Emily Leiserson 03:53

Awesome. Thank you so much. And then there's one more thing that goes with that. So you have two choices on the license by which your interview will be made available. So I'm going to read to you the second one, which is just the more explicit one. It says the COVID-19 Oral History Project, the Journal of the Plague Year: A COVID-19 Archive and the trustees of Indiana University or IU, acting for us agents employees or representatives, has an unlimited right to reproduce, use exhibit, display, perform, broadcast, create derivative works from, and distribute the oral history materials in any manner or media now existing or hereafter developed in perpetuity throughout the world. I agree that the oral history materials may be used by the COVID-19 Oral History Project and IU, including its assigns and transferees, for any purpose, including but not limited to marketing, advertising, publicity, or other promotional purposes. I agree that IU will have final editorial authority over the use of the oral history materials. And I waive any right to inspect or approve of any future use of the oral history materials. Moreover, I agree that the public has the right to use the materials under the terms of fair use in the US Copyright Law Section 107 of the US Copyright Act. Could you please just confirm that you're allowing us to use and share your interview under this License?

Zion Smith 05:49

Yes.

Emily Leiserson 05:50

Awesome. Thank you so much. Okay. And then finally, I ask that you verbally confirm that you've agreed that your interview can be made available immediately.

Zion Smith 06:02

Yes, my interview can be made available.

Emily Leiserson 06:05

Thank you so much for going through all that with me, Zion. So now the real questions. First, can you just tell me a little bit about yourself. This could be your day to day activities, where you work or go to school, what you do on a day to day basis, and whether that's changed since COVID?

Zion Smith 06:30

Yes. So actually, I'll just say, so pre COVID I was working downtown. I was at the Marriott downtown. And the hotels kind of got shut down because of COVID. I was also a student still. Since COVID, I'm now a community activist. I am on the media team for Indy 10, which is the Black Lives Matter chapter here. I'm also just a queer performing artist, drag queen, in the area, and I'm still student, and I still work.

Emily Leiserson 07:07

Wow, that's a lot.

Zion Smith 07:10

It is.

Emily Leiserson 07:11

Very busy. That's awesome. So I was going to also tell you, I try not to cross talk a whole lot. So if I'm not talking, don't worry about that. It's just- the recording will come out a little more clean if I'm not agreeing or talking at the same time as you. So I'll just try to nod.

Zion Smith 07:36

Okay.

Emily Leiserson 07:39

Awesome. So when you think about any common demographic categories: age, race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, how would you typically describe yourself? You mentioned you're a queer artist. Are there other common demographics you use?

Zion Smith 08:00

Let's see, I mean, Black and Brown, probably both. Lower- I'd say like upper lower class. I wouldn't necessarily say that I'm poor, but I definitely wouldn't say that I'm rich, either. I'm like either like the lowest of middle class or like the highest of lower class.

Emily Leiserson 08:25

Got it. And you mentioned you're also Puerto Rican by descent?

Zion Smith 08:30

Yes.

Emily Leiserson 08:32

Is that part of how you identify as well?

Zion Smith 08:34

Yes, that's the Brown part.

Emily Leiserson 08:36

That's the Brown part. Got it. Thank you. And what is your zip code?

Zion Smith 08:44

46208

Emily Leiserson 08:48

46208. So what does your neighborhood look like? And has it changed during COVID?

Zion Smith 08:57

The neighborhood I live in isn't necessarily the best. The crime rate is not necessarily high. But the poverty rate is high. It's a food desert here. So all of our grocery stores are like, three or four miles away. I think here we have a Dollar General, or a Family Dollar and two gas stations. That's pretty much it. Community is cool here. At least me and my family pretty much know everyone. My stepdad has lived here for 20 plus years. So everyone, pretty much knows who we are. I mean, so it's not the best community. But it's not bad at all.

Emily Leiserson 09:41

And has it, have you seen the way people interact in the neighborhood change during COVID? Or is it pretty similar to how it was before?

Zion Smith 09:49

I think people are a little bit more open to talking with each other, are like friendly with each other because, you know, we're all kind of stuck in the house. So there was only so many places you can go and stuff like that. I think for my neighborhood, I'm not saying that we all became one big family, but the community aspect sort of grew just a little bit more. So we're like, at the very least we're interacting with each other, or, you know, if you need it and I have it, then I'll try to give it to you. Yeah, yeah.

Emily Leiserson 10:25

So people kind of supporting each other, stepping up when another family or another person needs help, that sort of thing. Awesome. So, when you think about the pandemic, what issues have concerned you the most?

Zion Smith 10:40

Yikes. There are so many. I think one, the pandemic really showed how disproportionate some communities are compared to others. Especially healthcare. Like when the first tests and stuff start going out, it was so hard for people around here to even get tested for COVID. Now it's more readily, you know, available for people to get tested. But it was the areas that had the money, where they were easily getting tested and get treated and stuff like that. My neighborhood specifically didn't have like a lot of deaths or anything like that, again, everyone's pretty much, at least here, was pretty much in their houses and doing what they needed to be. But it just made it kind of hard. On top of the fact that, you know, being in a food desert, and also being at home, food was- is a necessity, because it was hard to go out and like just grab something to eat when everything is closed. So it was forcing people to cook, but there's people here who don't have cars. So you know, they can't go to a McDonald's that's around the corner; they have to go to a grocery store. But there's no grocery stores. There's limited resources. I feel like for the families who are struggling a lot, a lot of people are out of work, or people were at home, because their jobs had closed. And it just made it really hard for people. So I think disparities in communities really just like showed out during the virus. I will say that, just to keep it simple, I would say that's definitely the disparities, within like different communities was definitely like, the biggest issue.

Emily Leiserson 12:24

Yeah, definitely. No, that makes sense. Have you seen people's attitudes or activities change over time? It started in March, and now it's October. Have things ebbed and flowed? Or are they kind of consistent?

Zion Smith 12:43

I definitely think that people going out definitely changed. Again, with everything closed, there wasn't really anything to do. I will say that during this, I think a lot of people have picked up hobbies, just at various times, just to have something to do. Because I know a lot of people are just going stir crazy just being in the house. I know for a fact, I was one of them. I was out of work for a week, during COVID. And I was like, No, I can't do this, I have to find a job. And I did. I ended up working at a grocery store just to have something to do. Not because I wanted to. Just to have something to do. So I definitely think that yeah, it brought out a lot of people's interests. It made them like start like doing activities that like they maybe had done before, or things they used to like to do and didn't have time. I also think it made people focused a lot more on doing stuff with their family. Because they can, and they had no choice but to do stuff with their family. Now that everything's open, it's probably like the complete opposite. People are like please get me away from my family. I was around them for two or three months. I can't be around them anymore.

Emily Leiserson 13:56

Yeah, got it. So we'll talk about the protests next. So have you personally attended any protests? And if so, which ones?

Zion Smith 14:07

Yes. So I've actually, sorry. Let me give a little backstory. So this is how I got into Indy 10. So the first night, I want to say it was a Friday night, maybe really late Friday, is when they had like, it was like the first like unrest down there. And they had sort of like, things weren't like, hadn't gotten that bad. But there was a lot of people out there. A lot of things going on. That was the first night I got tear gassed. The first night I got shot with rubber bullets. The first night that I almost got arrested just for being out there.

Emily Leiserson 14:48

And this was, sorry, this was right after George Floyd's death?

Zion Smith 14:55

Yes, it was. I want to say it was, it had to be that week. And then I came back that Saturday. It was me and my two friends. And they tear gassed the crowd again. Which sorta led me into more of like wanting to be more involved. because when they tear gassed us at that time, I was scooping up kids to get them out of there, because the police were just not caring about the fact that there were children and elderly people out there. So I was trying to scoop up little kids, get them out the way. And then one of my friends, when the gas hit, we were so close to it, that it just took the breath out of her. So I also had to, like, scoop her up, and also get her out of there. On top of the fact that at this time, I didn't know you weren't supposed to work contacts, if you're giving tear gassed. So I had on contacts. The worst feeling ever, getting tear gas in your contacts. And we still stayed out there for a while. I think we left at about three o'clock, four o'clock . And then we went on that Sunday. We just ended up going really like every single day, for the most part. And then it was a Tuesday protest. And during that Tuesday protest, after the fact, I think it was led by, I can't think of what his name is. But he's in some organization. I don't remember. But after the fact, it was like seven, and they set out a curfew. And he was like Well, I'm going home, type thing, and everyone was like, well, we're not going home. So at that time, it was probably, I want to say like 150-200 people still out there. And this girl came up to me and she was like, you know, do you want to go on another march or whatever. So I was like, I mean, honestly, let's go for it. Did another march, completely led by me for the most part, me and a few other people who were just there. And that became a whole entire little media thing. Because it was streamed on all the different, I didn't realize how how it was like streamed on all the different news sites and stuff like that, and like interviews and stuff that I was giving as I was leading, and that kind of all blew up. And then afterwards, I had led the next day, like they had seen me on the news and all that stuff, the organizers who were there for that one. And then they're like, well help us lead this one. And then it just led to me keep leading. And then eventually Indy 10 had saw me, because Indy 10 for the most part, didn't need any of

the marches. They were just there to facilitate and like help out and stuff like that, and bring supplies and all that good stuff. But for the most part, they didn't really lead anything. They just, you know, were just like guiding for the most part. And then they met me, and then they asked me, did I want to be involved with actual organization. And then it led to that. So pretty much I've been to almost, I would say like 75% of the protests that people was just seeing, for like downtown and stuff like that, I was either at or leading. We went, we had a protest in Brazil, Indiana, for our sister organization, IU YA [Indiana Undocumented Youth Alliance], which is like an undocumented organization, which wasn't great. The Brazilians were not very kind. There was probably I will say like 150 of us at the most we're surrounded by a good 100 people with guns. So had to get them out of there. That was also their first protest as well. So yeah, it's been quite a few protests.

Emily Leiserson 19:06

Wow. Yes, that is a lot. And were all of those peaceful protests? What you were seeing with the people around you? Or was there any....

Zion Smith 19:15

Yes, the first protest I went to was peaceful until the crowd was tear gassed, which the chief said whoever the officer was the did the first tear gas, accidentally tear gassed the crowd. What does that mean? I have no idea. So that ended up getting just bad from that night. I went that Sunday, which I didn't stay the entire Sunday, but apparently, it was long after I left, I think the chief or someone said that he was going to like march with the crowd or whatever. But then they still ended up tear gassing the crowd afterwards. A whole like lawsuit and stuff is going on with that. But for the most part, they've been peaceful. It's been agitators and stuff, like people who just want to just be there to cause some type of trouble. The one in Brazil was completely peaceful on our side, like nothing threatening about it. And so and the people in Brazil are the ones who were like, Here's all our guns, get out of here, typa thing. But yeah, for the most part, they've been pretty peaceful.

Emily Leiserson 20:30

Yeah, yeah. So what has motivated you to do all of the protesting that you've done?

Zion Smith 20:41

So that's kind of a complicated question for me, because part of it is the first night that we went, it wasn't really- Not anything against like, George Floyd, God rest his soul, or anything like that, but that wasn't really what brought me out. For Indy, we have two cases, they're not national cases, but we have McHale Rose, and we have Dreasjon Reed. Which McHale Rose we picked up I want to say a few weeks after Dreasjon's. And the thing for that, for me, it was I've never met Dreasjon. But I met his mom, I met his girlfriend, I met his family, met his friends. And another thing for me is that at the time, I was turning 20. Or I was turning 21. Sorry. And he was close to me in age. And I just saw how his mom, like, reacted to like having to identify his body and all that stuff. And I couldn't imagine my mom having to go through that, especially the way that they killed him was just so brutal. So that's what really

just led me out there at first. And then eventually, I realized that like, I have family, who is Black and Brown, and I have myself who is Black and Brown. And like, if I'm not out there fighting for other people, then I can't expect anyone to fight for me. On top of the fact that I'm still, I've always been very politically vocal. So I couldn't not, like when the time present itself, be out there when I need to be. So yeah, that's where I just, I think that anyone who's in any type of marginalized group should be more than willing to fight for themselves. Especially if you're like me, and you have like a bunch of little cousins and little sisters and stuff like that. I don't want them to have to be fighting for the same thing. You know, I had an interview before, I think the first night that I led, that was like, you know, our grandparents are fighting for this, we're still fighting for this, and I'm not okay with having to continue to like, try to fight for basic human rights and human decency. I don't think that's necessarily for me to have to keep fighting. So, you know, if I can do a few hard months, or a few hard years worth of labor, so the next generation is not having to do the same thing, that's perfectly fine with me.

Emily Leiserson 23:15

What does the racial justice movement mean to you?

Zion Smith 23:22

What do you mean by that?

Emily Leiserson 23:25

Well, it may be that you've already answered this question. So, you know, if it's just the answer to your previous question, that's totally fine. But are you looking at this movement from a- when you're participating in the movement, is it for personal reasons, family reasons, historical reasons? Is it for this city? Is it for the people who have been killed, is it for all people of color, you know? What is it about for you?

Zion Smith 24:13

Okay, so, I mean, I think I could, I definitely will say that part of it is definitely personal. Because, again, I have Black and Brown family. I think the other thing is that it is a historical thing as well, because again, we're fighting for the same thing. But it's, I think a lot of people when they think about at least this current stage of the movement, they're only thinking about like Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, which tragic cases, yes. But this is more than just police killing Black people. Which is, I mean, again, you know, police are tripping because they started off as slave catchers. So the fact that they're even still being funded or anything is kind of a joke, but it's about an entire system that has been designed against Black and Brown people or any marginalized people. It's about fighting for everyone. There's only so much that I can get from being free if not everyone else is free. And we say it all the time, you know. One of us can't be, I'm sorry. All of us can't be free until one of us is free. And we're not free yet. We're still going through the same thing generations in the past have went through. So, you know, until we can get that, I have, I kind of have no choice but to keep fighting. So a lot of it is, I will say like, half of it is personal for myself, and the other half of it is for other people. Except when I'm

actually leading, or I'm like, actually, like in the protest. That's for other people. Because I know for a fact that I can defend myself, but everyone can't defend themselves. And everyone shouldn't have to defend themselves. Some people need someone to defend them.

Emily Leiserson 26:12

Yeah. So you mentioned you're an artist.

Zion Smith 26:15

Yes.

Emily Leiserson 26:18

What do you think, is the role of art in the movement for racial justice? If anything?

Zion Smith 26:27

Yeah. So I think human nature, just in general, always gravitates to something visually appealing. So art, especially like logos and stuff like that now, sometimes they are more than just me screaming out of a chant, or like posters or banners or things that people are carrying. Again, sometimes they don't remember words, but you always remember like pictures and stuff like that. So art definitely plays a big role. And art is not necessarily just like pictures, music plays a big role into it. Dancing, fashion, all kinds of things play big roles into it. So it's not just- every single medium of art can play a role into the movement, not just one or the other.

Emily Leiserson 27:20

And is their role about giving people a platform to express themselves? Or is it about making their voices heard so that other people will understand better what they're going through? Both? Or is it other things?

Zion Smith 27:36

Honestly, it really can be both. Art is usually self expression anyway. Doesn't matter who the artist is, it's usually some form of self expression. And sometimes the- everyone's not good with words. So sometimes drawing a picture tells an entire story that you can't necessarily vocalize. So it can be both. It can definitely be both.

Emily Leiserson 28:02

Yeah, totally. So has your experience and the protest shaped the way you think about our community differently?

Zion Smith 28:17

Oh, absolutely. So, the thing for people of color, but usually Black people, is that we all have moments where you realize that we're Black. And I think, for me, seeing first of all seeing Dreasjon, or at least

seeing how all of that is playing out, was one of them. The Brazil thing was one of them. I've talked to plenty of politicians, and to see the way elected officials think is definitely one of those things. I'm like, Okay, y'all really don't have our interests in mind at all. And it's not just, it's not even just with white politicians. It's with Black politicians as well. You know, I had a meeting a few, I wanna say, like, two or three months ago, with the Attorney General. And he had wrote a letter to Nancy Pelosi and a few other people saying that systematic racism is not a thing. There's no evidence for it. He's a Black man. And the cops who murdered Dreasjon, the cop who murdered Dreasjon and the one who said that this is going to be a closed casket, they were both Black too. So it led me to realize that like certain institutions, even with them having people of color in it, does not necessarily mean that they're inclusive, it means they have a person of color in it. And that's that. So it's definitely changed how I see figures in the community. Another part of the movement that I've witnessed is how people are capitalizing on the movement. There are at least people that I've known or there are people that I know who are organizers of different groups that are, you know, figureheads, or whatever, who don't necessarily have the interests of the movement ahead, but they, they're called poverty pimps. Poverty pimps are people who, everything they do has to be on social media. They take every interview. They really, they don't come out unless something big news is happening with racial justice type thing. But they're not doing anything for the community. They're just there. So I've definitely seen a lot of that as well. I've also seen a lot of, you know, the hate that, at least for my community, specifically, the Black part of my community, has for women and queer people who are organizers. The first night that I had led, because I watched the live, which was so dumb of me. Never read the comments on anything that you're on. But I did. And half the comments were not from white people criticizing me; it was from Black men criticizing me. So it's led me to realize that, like, we have a lot of issues within my own community that we have to address at some point. Which is fine, you know, but it's definitely a lot of things I've learned that like, my communities still has to deal with, and people who are supposed to represent my community, we still have to deal with them, too. So yeah.

Emily Leiserson 31:45

Yeah. I mean, could you tell me, if you don't mind, how you think your experience as a queer Black man, a queer Black and Brown man, is different from the experience of a straight Black or Brown man during the protests, like while participating in this movement?

Zion Smith 32:04

Yeah, of course. So for me, the Black community just in general has a problem with homophobia, which is honestly and truthfully, I mean, a lot of people don't understand. But homophobia is a issue of white supremacy, not really an issue, it's an issue that's been put on my community from white supremacy. But either way, for me, a lot of people are uncomfortable with someone like me being the face of it, because a lot of Black people, you know, think that people are trying to feminize the community and take away the idea of a Black man from the community and all that stuff. So when they see someone like me, who is either at least gender fluid in appearance, because the way I look now is not usually how I like out in protest. Someone who's either fluid in gender, at least in appearance, or a male who's more feminine,

they see that as a weakness. So when they see a person like me who's so active, or who's getting a lot of respect, or a lot of praise from whoever, or a lot of like, public criticism, from wherever, they see that as a negative. As opposed to a straight Black man who could go out there and lead it and be perfectly fine, at least as far as my community, from criticism and stuff like that. Yeah. Usually femmes or femme presenting people just have a hard time in these type of things when they're trying to lead people there's, yeah,

Emily Leiserson 33:42

Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense. Thank you. I know, that's probably not an easy question.

Zion Smith 33:54

It's not really that is a hard question. It's just I feel like I can go on for about it for days. It's just such a, like, multifaceted question. So that was my best attempt at trying to like, just simplify it.

Emily Leiserson 34:05

No, it's great. You can keep talking. We have time, so if you want to keep going on any of these questions, don't feel like you have to cut it short. That's totally fine. So I guess, I want to ask you a little bit more about a couple of the main experience, like you mentioned Dreasjon and Brazil and politicians. So what what was it like, when you're in that moment, in the Brazil protests, where there's so much hate. What's going through your mind in that moment?

Zion Smith 34:44

It's a few things. For me, I want to say the difference between like the first time I led to the Brazil is that like, I didn't really have a lot of fear, as I did just anger, just pure just rage. And I think when I got to Brazil, I had to first of all realize that like, Indy 10 was there just to help, just to facilitate. Because undocumented people, we don't have anyone who's undocumented within our actual organization. But they're also still like family to us. So in that moment, it was more so me protecting the people who are undocumented who were there, because there was a lot of undocumented people who were there, or people who are undocumented who were there. It was protect them, get them out of there, worry about me later, type thing. Because I was acting as security. Indy 10, for the most part, was just security. We had our, some of our actual security out there. So all we were doing was making sure that everyone else was good, keeping watch, you know. This isn't our issue, but it's an issue we care about. Let them voice whatever they need to voice, and then whenever the time comes, which the time came kind of early, because I think we were out there for only two hours, it was make sure that everyone gets home. And gets home safe.

Emily Leiserson 36:06

Yeah. Got it. And you don't have to name names on this. But what has your experience been like working with politicians? Or leaders in the community? What's it been like and what would you like to see, that you might or might not be seeing?

Zion Smith 36:25

So I'm working with some, um, the politicians here are very, there's a lot of respectability politics, especially like amongst our Black politicians. I worked not too long ago with the Legislative Black Caucus. And to see their approach to policy change or policy suggestions was kind of alarming because it wasn't, it was more so like them asking the other politicians to just look over when they had a chance. Not really demanding that they look over and take it seriously. Which Indiana in general just has a long history of respectability politics. So that's not anything new. But it's definitely something that is still happening. A lot of the politicians here aren't really receptive to listening. They usually say a lot of things to just get the heat off of them momentarily, but not actually mean it. Mayor's a good example. The Mayor had promised that there would be complete transparency for at least Dreasjon's case, and that we could sort of like just rely on him to do whatever it is that he could do to make sure that everything got done. And that never happened. He said the same thing when they had a, it was, they had a protest, or it was like a sit in that led to a protest afterwards, at the statehouse. And he had said that, I can't think of, was it Andre Carson? Yes. That Andre Carson was like going to keep him accountable and all that stuff. And that didn't happen from either one of them. So yeah, politicians aren't, the politicians here aren't really receptive. Which I mean, older people in general just aren't receptive to young people, as they should be. So there's that. But they just don't care. As long as, you know, they're in the clear, then it's fine. I would love to see the politicians here, not necessarily, not just be more honest, because I would rather someone just tell me how it is in the face, even if I don't like it, than lie to me. But I also wish the politicians here, specifically like the Democrats here, would be just a little bit more aggressive in their approach to things. Because they're not right now. They're fine with letting things go how they go. The Governor is another one who's just fine with letting things go how they go. I also wish that the politicians here listened more to marginalized communities. Because they don't. Even the Black politicians here, they don't listen to their own communities. So, you know, I definitely wish that the politicians would listen more to people, instead of doing what they think is the right thing to do. Well, not necessarily the right thing to do, whatever they want to do. I wish they would just do their jobs. Because you know, that would that would be nice, if they actually did them. And that's pretty much for anyone. That's for the Governor, that's for the Mayor, Attorney General, City Council. All of that. You know, we had a protest not too long ago, outside of the City Council building, and they still increase IMPD's budget. After listening to our reading the hundreds of meals and stuff like that, they still did what was not necessary. You know, we had suggested a million and one ways for them to take some of the money, or take a good bit of the funding from IMPD and put it into social reform organizations or some type of social help for people. That'd be job placement, housing, stuff like that. It doesn't make sense for IMPD to have 31% of the budget. It doesn't make sense for any police department to have a 31% of an entire city's budget, no matter how bad the crime rate is. Because usually when you look into areas that have high crime rate, that also means that usually the schools are bad. Housing instability is a big thing. Drug use is a big thing. I want to probably say that STDs are a big thing. Food deserts are usually happening. All of this money that they put into that can easily go into all these other different things that they won't do. So yeah, I wish the politicians would more deal with that. And I also wish that

they will stop trying to just appease. I hate appeasement, I really do. It doesn't work. And we can look at that historically, they tried to appease Hitler, and they still started a World War. So, I don't love appeasement, I would rather them do something constructive, that is a long term thing, instead of doing something to quickly fix the problem. Like now they have, they're making a Council that has four civilians on it. But the terms of that Council is that anyone who is involved or has any like, record of them ever been with the Black Lives Matter organization is not allowed on that. So it's not them, again it's not them really trying to help us out. What's going to end up happening, I'm sure, is that they're going to find for people who are very pro-police, or very, like laws matter, whatever the hell that means, to put them on there, and then say, like, what are our four civilians? So yeah, I definitely wish they were just more honest, and more like willing to do the work that they're supposed to be doing.

Emily Leiserson 42:32

Yeah. Yeah. Thank you. That was great. So do you feel like the movement, protest movement, what you see in Indy 10, has changed, since, you know, the first protests that you were involved with, after George Floyd's death?

Zion Smith 43:01

Yeah, well, the thing is now for us is that we have more, a little bit more, a little more of us. And we're a little bit more organized. Again, though, the thing is that like Indy 10, throughout all the protests, was never leading to protests. I think we only led two protests. The rest of them, we were only there to facilitate. Which we did. So I think now we've gotten to a spot where like, we're really ready to facilitate more, because it's going to be more coming up soon. With like Dreasjon Reed and all that stuff. We're still waiting to get the decision on that. So it's going to be more either civil unrest for him not getting justice or civil unrest for them, for the police officers basically getting off of it, or whatever. So we're definitely now at a place where we can actually facilitate. People like me, I want to say it was a few new of us, like few of us who are new to social work. So now we've gotten to the point where it's constructive. It was, I know, for me sometimes we got a little performative. So now we've gotten to a point where now we're actually doing what we need to do. And we're just there to help. So I think we're now, we're just at a good place for right now.

Emily Leiserson 44:28

Yeah. Yeah. What are the different groups you're seeing who are organizing protests that you're working with?

Zion Smith 44:38

Yep. So the funny thing is that usually for the most part, there have been organizations that we, or just people that we just don't know. IUYA is again, one of our close ones, but theirs is usually for like undocumented issues or whatever. We have Queering Indy, who, you know, we're really close with. We have SURJ [Standing Up for Racial Justice], who we're really close with. The first protest that was actually led, was led by, I think it was like four girls, who I have no idea what their, even what their

names are, but they just led them. So it's usually, for us, sometimes we work with other organizations. Like when we went to Brazil. Just to make sure we have everything prepared out. But for the most part it's usually someone else random starts it, and we'll get it out, and then we'll go and just facilitate. Because we said for us, we were not done with that at all, we're just another factor of the movement. So what we don't want to do is become the authority on who can protest, or lead a protest, or start a protest or not. What we're only there for, specifically, is to make sure that everyone's safe, make sure that everyone's good. If someone needs someone to lead or something like that, or they need help leading or keeping up morale and all that stuff, we're there for that. But for the most part, yeah, we usually don't organize any of the protests, we usually just go to facilitate,

Emily Leiserson 46:10

So you want other people to feel like they can protest.

Zion Smith 46:12

Of course. So it's like for us, you know, everybody's upset. So it's like, Who are we to say that the way you're upset is not the way it should be? Of course not, you know. If you feel like you're upset, if you feel like you want to start some type of thing, and you can get like the word out there, which if it's like a smaller thing or something like that, we have no like issue, helping, we've helped like smaller protests or whatever, become bigger protests from just like advertising it with them or whatever. But yeah, we want everyone to feel like they can lead, because we're all Black or Brown or marginalized, or not marginalized and are just, you know, upset. So we should all have the right to. Sorry, We should all have the right to be upset, and protest and lead and all that good stuff.

Emily Leiserson 47:05

Yeah, absolutely. It makes sense. Okay, so, a couple questions just about you. What do you imagine your life being like in a year or in five years? Or both.

Zion Smith 47:23

In a year or five years. That's a good question. Out of college. Thank God. I'm not sure. I don't believe that I will be doing social work as hard as I am now. You know, the organizers of Indy 10 don't think they'll be here for another five years. Not because they don't care or anything like that. But this type of work is a lot. A lot, a lot of mental strain. I've learned that in the first two weeks. So for people like Leah or Kyra, who's the ones who started Indy 10, they were doing this for six years. So I don't see myself necessarily doing it that long. Will I stop caring? No. I want eventually it to be more so me teaching about these type of things than me actually like being out there protesting and talking with politicians and stuff like that. Again it's, sometimes it feels like a waste. Honestly, I know it's not. But sometimes it does feel like it. So I don't know if I can put myself through that much stress for the next few years. But I definitely do want to be doing whatever it is that I'm going to do, because I'm not really sure what it is that I'm going to be doing as far as career wise. But I definitely, I want to be involved in community, but not specifically community work, if that makes sense.

Emily Leiserson 48:49

Yeah, it does make sense.

Zion Smith 48:50

I just want to like be back for a minute. And just like, facilitate where I need to be. But not necessarily just out there leading.

Emily Leiserson 48:56

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So you do a lot of different things. You're in school, you know, you have your various jobs and various activities. What- are there other groups that you're a part of, or institutions you're a part of, who you see kind of getting involved in the movement, or changing during 2020, in response to the movement?

Zion Smith 49:26

I don't really. I mean, I am really close with the people who are at Queering Indy, because I care about queer issues just as much as I do Black or Latino issues as well. But other than that, I don't really know. If someone else pops up, you know, anything is bound to happen. But those are the organizations that like, I know for a fact are like good people, and like they're actually trying to get things done. Because I know a lot of what we do is not necessarily public, like we do a lot of stuff that's in the background that no one ever hears about it. Unless we talk about it. So yeah, I really love them. And they really are like, great people and they're actually trying to get, like stuff done. So, yeah.

Emily Leiserson 50:13

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. They seem like great people. I'm going to ask one or two kind of employment questions. So how has your job situation changed? You've talked about this off and on, but, you know?

Zion Smith 50:33

Yes. So, for the most part, I got a different job, where I work at night. So I can have the day to do whatever. So yeah, that's pretty much been it with that. When like the protests first started, I actually quit at Kroger's, which is where I was working at, the week before.

Emily Leiserson 50:55

Oh my gosh.

Zion Smith 50:56

And then all the protests and stuff started. So yeah, I just had to change my schedule to around something that would be easier for me to still do stuff. Usually politicians aren't trying to meet at eight o'clock at night, or anything like that. They're usually trying to meet during the day. So like, if I do need

to meet with a politician, I have the entire day to meet them and then go to work. So yeah, it's definitely just made me just change my schedule around a little bit.

Emily Leiserson 51:28

Gotcha. I saw your photo of Barack Obama behind you. Is he a role model? Or what's the reason for that?

Zion Smith 51:41

So, I'm not necessarily the biggest Obama fan. But the thing that I loved about Obama and Michelle is that there's never been a president who has gotten so much hate from not only just the public, but also his own constituents. I don't even think Trump has gotten as much hate. So the fact that they were asking him for his, you know, birth certificate and all that stuff. You know, it just proved that, like America is still what it was. And I just love the fact that like, they stuck through that and like, kept going, even though that was stressful. I know for a fact that it had to be the most stressful thing for both of them. Yeah. And I also think, like, during that time, that was the first election that I remember. And like to see him and like to see how my mom and like, wow, the fans have reacted to him. Like, I remember that day. We went to like a little party for the election. And I'm like, everyone was like crying and stuff like that. Because there was just like, you know, we never thought in our lifetimes, that something like this would happen. And that's something I remember vividly. So, not really that I'm a fan of his actual presidency, but I am a fan of like, his resilience.

Emily Leiserson 53:09

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Thank you. All right. Well, I just have a couple last questions. oCan you think of other people who you think would be good to do an interview like this? Who would like to, or who I should talk with just to get their perspective?

Zion Smith 53:31

I would say if you could reach out to the actual like, founders of Indy 10, Leah and Kyra, they usually do a lot of interviews and stuff anyway. They're really good people talk about it. Because they've been doing it for six years. So

Emily Leiserson 53:46

Awesome. Yeah, absolutely. Do you have their contact information? Or what do you think would be the best way to get.

Zion Smith 53:57

Yeah, I can- Yeah, I mean, I think I'm seeing them today, but I can like, get, like get emails and stuff like that.

Emily Leiserson 54:02

Okay. Yeah, emails would be great.

Zion Smith 54:03

Yeah, I think they'd be more than interested, though.

Emily Leiserson 54:06

That would be awesome. Yeah. That would be great to talk to them. And, yeah, is there anything else that you want to share?

Zion Smith 54:16

I don't think so. I don't know. Make sure that you vote.

Emily Leiserson 54:25

Yes.

Zion Smith 54:27

Go vote. Put the pressure on local politicians. Justice for McHale Rose. Justice for Dreasjon Reed. And that's it.

Emily Leiserson 54:41

Awesome. Thank you.

Zion Smith 54:43

No problem.

Emily Leiserson 54:47

Hang on. I'm going to stop recording. Okay.