Guest: John-Paul Chaisson-Cardenas
Interviewer: Brian Campbell
Location: Des Moines, IA
Date: July 23, 2020

Narration: I'm Brian Campbell and this is Mid-Americana: Stories from a Changing Midwest. Today, we hear the story of, well, maybe I should let him share his name…

JPCC: Guatemalan names tend to be very long. John Paul is my first name. My confirmation name is Sebastian. Then Chaisson is my father's name. Cardenas is my mom's name. Then my family name is Anzueto, from my grandmother.

Narration: John-Paul's name was just one aspect of his identity that changed when he moved from Guatemala to the United States as a teenager and started school.

JPCC: I start writing my full name into the boxes, and of course I run out because US names are pretty short and succinct. The teacher picked up the pencil and erased my name and I became, from that day, John Chaisson. But my name was literally changed. The second question was that set of boxes that people ask all the time because of the racial institutions of the United States is that "What are you?" African American, Native American, Hispanic, Other. Because I came from Guatemala and Hispanic is really not a word in Guatemala – it's really a US concoction – I looked at the thing, and I looked at my skin, and I said white. I wasn't going to pick Other because I didn't know what the other was. The teacher again picked up the pencil and erased that and put me under Hispanic. So I learned that I was a Hispanic that day. Whatever the heck that meant. Of course I didn't do very well on the test because, you know, you don't speak English, you don't have the cultural influence. Those tests are highly biased anyway. I did very, very poorly. That particular day, I learned a few things. One is that I wasn't who I thought I was, that my name wasn't my name, and that I was dumb.

Narration: John-Paul Chaisson-Cardenas has learned to embrace his identity as someone who exists in between the boxes, in the liminal spaces. He has spent years working as a bridge builder, helping white and Latino Midwesterners share their stories and find spaces of commonality, working in schools, local government, and directing the state of Iowa's Division of Latino Affairs.

And he has devoted decades of his life working with young people, especially those who, like him, have to navigate the in between spaces. John-Paul served as the leader of Iowa's 4H youth development program, and he worked to transform 4H from a program for white farm kids into one that was also welcoming of immigrants and LGBTQ youth, a place where they could define their own identities. But as you'll hear, changing a Midwest institution like 4H proved controversial, and eventually cost John-Paul his job.

Now in his 50s, this Guatemalan-American who was once labeled a dumb hispanic is working on a PhD at the University of Iowa focused on Educational Leadership. He's exploring in more depth the sorts of systemic change he's been part of throughout his life in the U.S., supporting immigrants and building bridges to overcome the racial and cultural differences that divide us.

But to understand how John-Paul came to occupy this space in between, it might help to start with his parents' unlikely love story.

JPCC: My dad and my mom are two very different people. To this day, I don't quite understand how they got together or why they stayed together. Now they're in their 52nd year of marriage with some gaps in the middle, but we count it. It's interesting because my dad was a Navy guy. I would call him ultra conservative, white guy from Alabama. My mom, on the other hand, is this beautiful, Latina powerhouse. Small, petite, a brilliant academic who is really a revolutionary at heart. She was closer to looking at socialism when my dad was a conservative republican. To this day, those things still show up. Let's just say the political battles in our house were pretty lively throughout the years.

The way they met is my mom was an exchange student. She was a brilliant student in high school and college, so she won a scholarship to come study in the United States. As she was getting ready to go back to Guatemala, they offered her to have a tour of the Naval base in Pensacola. They were getting ready to have it, and as luck would have it, the regular tour guide for the base was ill that day, and they tapped into my dad, a photographer, to come in and do kind of a substitute to being the tour guide for that day. What ended up happening is that my dad, he always said he fell in love with her in that moment. He figured out how to ask the entire group of exchange students to go roller skating that night so he could just meet my mom. He paid for everybody too so he could just meet my mom. They maintained a multi-year relationship writing letters. In those times there was no email or anything like that, so it was hard work. Eventually, without really knowing each other very well, he went down and asked for her hand in marriage. She said yes, and they got married. That's how the worlds came together. If I remember correctly also, my dad paid a penalty for marrying my mom for a national, in the sense that the story is lost a lot of his security clearances for marrying a foreign national. It truncated his career in the military, which he left, and that's how we ended up in Guatemala.

BC: He moved to Guatemala to marry her?

JPCC: Yeah. At first they tried to live here in the United States, but because my dad's career wasn't going to go anywhere anymore, they tried to live in Guatemala. My mom really didn't adapt very well to the United States. It was a tough going living on a military base for my mom with racism as it was in the early seventies in the southern states. She was just not accepted.

Narration: John-Paul was born in Albany, Georgia, but moved with his family as an infant.
Narration: His experience as a child in Guatemala shaped him in lasting ways, especially the value of education, social justice, and spirituality.

JPCC: We lived mostly in the capital but would go up to the coast quite a bit. Guatemala City is a big, cosmopolitan city. I grew up there, mostly with my mom and grandmother who were the caretakers of my aunt in and out of a lot of my life. There is where I learned how to be a human being. I actually credit my aunt – I remember one of the places that I started my work in social justice was actually because of my aunt. My aunt at the time was doing her work on her master's thesis on the effects of malnutrition on babies, or something similar to that. We would go visit these hospitals in these rural areas where, because in Guatemala there's a lot of poverty, children were literally dying of starvation. I remember one particular instance that's engraved in my mind where a child's pigmen d was going to die. There was really, at that point, not much that they could do other than feeding fluids and keeping the pain down. The damage was there. I think that's something that clicked in me, the particular situation we were living in.

My family has always been involved in issues of social justice, especially around indigienous peoples. I think partly because my family, which is indigienous by – they're Mayan – by descendancy, were caught in that place where through colonialism, they lost their native roots. Even their dress changed over the years in order to respond to that colonization mentality. Spirituality got syncretized, meshed into something different. All of those things were always part and parcel of who I am. My family, which I am part of and always have existed as, are really liminal in nature. We're not quite of one world and not quite of another. We've always lived in that middle ground, that gray area.

In addition to that, I think that part of what was going on – I went to Catholic military school, which I know sounds like a contradiction. It was a private school run by Jesuits, I believe, and social justice was part and parcel of the curriculum of the school at that time. We did a lot of service in the community, and one of the things I really liked doing is that we would help especially Indian women, not all ing Spanish, many of them not speaking Spanish, to learn how to read and write. That was a lot of the work I started when very young. I think it was like the fourth grade on. It was something that was important to the school that I went to. It affected my life. Recurring touches with faith and social justice would happen throughout my life. I think that was one of the places it began.

Narration: This Catholic military school committed to social justice wasn't just an odd contradiction. In the midst of Guatemala's 38 year civil war, this was a subversive and dangerous combination.

JPCC: It presented as military. We wore white uniforms that looked like Navy uniforms and marched – but the undergirding pedagogy was really around social justice. Which was, again, a space of liminality. Here you're marching and parading down the streets on Independence Day and everybody knows who the batallón blanco, the white battalion, is. And yet, underneath, people are doing a lot of social justice work. It's part of the reason my particular class of students was, in the eighties, one of the classes that a lot of the people disappeared from. They were taken away by paramilitary groups. Simply disappeared, never came back. They're part of the generation desaparecidos. One of the risks that I ran in Guatemala was to be a desaparecido because of the way I looked at the world. It's also on t risk. It is a major part of why we wound up in the United States.

BC: Do you remember as a kid when you became aware of that danger, that reality going on around you?

JPCC: I don't think you become aware of it. It's very much like the crab in the hot water pot. Things happen very slowly. Because the war lasted 38 years, it actually was before me. To me, it was the state of normal, right? You don't feel it in Guatemala. You don't feel that. It's not until you leave that you look back and say, "That's not right. It's not right that my baby sister was born in a hospital where bombs were going off outside the door at the same time she was being born." That's not normal. It's not normal to have black vans simply come up and pick up people with machine guns and disappear. That's not normal. To a kid who's grown up with it, it's just life. It's nothing special. It's taken getting to my adulthood and getting outside of Guatemala to be able to look back in retrospective, to be able to have that awareness that that is not a normal way of life, that there is a better way of doing it.

Narration: Eventually, the threat of violence became too great for John-Paul and his family. To this day, he doesn't know all that led up to their departure, but he remembers the urgency of quickly packing a single suitcase.

JPCC: There is a dark spot in this journey in the sense that I don't quite know what happened outside of my mom disappearing for a period of time in Guatemala. What I've been able to gather together is that she was kidnapped. My mom doesn't talk about it, so we don't quite know what happened during that experience, but I do know she was very different when she came back. If I'm going to contextually place it, that's the tim ack vans and taken away. Some would return and some would not. My mom came back. Now when she came back, we left almost immediately. We came to the United States, and we didn't have enough money, because we just didn't, to make it all the way here. We had enough money to pay for tickets to Houston, Texas.

At the time, my dad was living in Greeley, Colorado. My mom and dad were separated, so he had collected a few things in his time here, including a trailer house. He had bought a trailer house where we lived. When we landed, my dad came down to Houston, Texas to pick us up in a baby blue Ford Pinto – the ones that blow up. He knew it blew up, but he didn't have enough money to replace it. Our families were pretty poor on both sides. Then we drove to Greeley. It was the middle of winter, I think December, and when we got to Greeley, I remember the first major light of memory that I have is seeing the trailer home where we were supposed to live had burned down because of an electrical fire. There's this husk of this poop green trailer with big holes in the middle of it that we were supposed to live in. So, my first experience in the United States is to be homeless.

Somehow, through some program, we got a very tiny apartment – I think it was one bedroom, maybe two – but it was really tiny. One of those where it's compact, like a couple hundred feet or something like that. We lived there as we were in the middle of the winter. My dad and I were rebuilding the trailer home because we didn't have enough money. He didn't have insurance on it. We just literally rebuilt the trailer. My dad was pretty handy, so everything from floors to roof – that thing was never, ever again up to code because I know we took so many shortcuts because it was the middle of winter and we needed a place to live. We couldn't afford to stay in the place we were at. We were paying rent still while we were trying to fix it at the other place at the lot because they don't stop rent when your house burns down, right? That is kind of my experience.

At the same time, I started school and the first day in school, I got beat up for being a Mexican. That was my welcome to school. Over time, we rebuilt it but my dad couldn't get a job in Greeley, so he found one in Cheyenne, Wyoming just fifty miles north. Very quickly, we moved to Cheyenne, Wyoming where I would spend my high school years. The memories I have of the United States are Cheyenne, Wyoming, that cultural mecca of the United States. That's an environment within itself.

At the time, Cheyenne was rapidly changing because meatpacking plants had come in and there was a lot of racial tension between the new Latinos who lived mostly in the suburbs, mostly actually around our trailer because we moved the trailer from Greeley to Cheyenne. I don't know how that thing made it. One of the things – I still have a picture of that baby green trailer, Cheyenne, Wyoming – it was the ugliest thing you've ever seen.

Narration: Safe from the violence of civil war, John-Paul settled into this new world and started high school, where he would learn to navigate a new set of dangerous divisions.

JPCC: I was supposed to go to a school called East, but again, when I got there, there was a lot of racial tension, so I got beat up. I was in a lot of fights at the beginning. Usually, in Cheyenne, they usually have those high school groups, the preppies… at Cheyenne, they had another group called the cowboys. The cowboys, you really have to think about in that space and time as classically what many people would call the rednecks. I would get beat up simply because I was a Mexican. There was no distinction at that time between Mexican and Guatemalan. All Latinos were Mexicans or 'spics. Those were the names that were used at that particular time.

I was supposed to go to East High School, but it so happened that the summer before I was supposed to start classes, because by that time it was summer, there was a soccer coach from Central who ing in the Mexican leagues, and he was like, "You're coming with me to Central." And he was the one who recruited me to go to Central High School to go to school.

The other story I probably should tell is how my academics went, because I think that one's important. I remember that when I first got to the United States, the way that I was placed, I was simply thrown into special education. At the time, there was no ESL or ELL program in Cheyenne. My mom, being a teacher back in Guatemala – although by that time, because of credentialing, my mom was working as a janitor in a phone company. Many immigrant professionals come to the United States and they lose their degrees because the United States simply won't recognize them, including teachers and so forth. She came in to argue with the principal in her broken English, all four foot ten of her. I remember a particular incident where she was arguing with the vice principal around me being placed in special education, and quite literally my mom was arguing, but he towered so high over her, she got on his chair so she could be at eye level with him. And she talked him out of putting me in special education straight out. What she got him to agree is to test me, to figure out where I was supposed to be. I was always a decent student in Guatemala.

And what wound up happening… in Cheyenne there was not a common sense of how to test somebody who did not speak English yet. They were going to test me, because that's what the law said. The law did not say how they were going to test somebody. What they did, they grabbed a PSAT, the college entrance exam, and that's what they were going to use to place my grade, because they also lowered me a grade when I got to the United States. I remember when I was taking that test, the first thing I remember is that I didn't speak English, so they had the Spanish teacher come in and interpret for me, except the Spanish teacher, this white woman in Cheyenne, Wyoming, didn't actually speak Spanish. She couldn't really translate. That was the first thing that was happening. I also remember when I began to deal with the first box where you put your name. At the beginning of this, I talked a little bit about the length of my name. I start writing my full name into the boxes, and of course I run out because US names are pretty short and succinct. The teacher picked up the pencil and erased my name and I became, from that day, John Chaisson. But my name was literally changed. The second question was that set of boxes that people ask all the time because of the racial institutions of the United States is that "What are you?" African American, Native American, Hispanic, Other. Because I came from Guatemala and Hispanic is really not a word in Guatemala – it's really a US concoction – I looked at the thing, and I looked at my skin, and I said white. I wasn't going to pick Other because I didn't know what the other was. The teacher again picked up the pencil and erased that and put me under Hispanic. So I learned that I was a Hispanic that day. Whatever the heck that meant. Of course I didn't do very well on the test because, you know, you don't speak English, you don't have the cultural influence. Those tests are highly biased anyway. I did very, very poorly. That particular day, I learned a few things. One is that I wasn't who I thought I was, that my name wasn't my name, and that I was dumb. Those are the lessons that the US school system taught me when I first came here.

And I dove into it. It was like a self-fulfilling prophecy. I began to get in trouble. Any time there was a fight, I was to blame and so forth. And that was my high school education. I was not allowed to take high math classes higher than eighth grade. I think geometry was the highest one I was allowed to take. I had, by my senior year, four choir classes and two P.E. classes. I was not allowed to take English composition, which was because I didn't speak English, and the other one was that the teacher didn't want someone to slow the other students down because I was a dumb Mexican. He actually said that.

The only thing that saved me in high school was that I played soccer very well. I was an all-stater and captain of the soccer team. They would give me grades quite literally so I would be eligible to play. That's how my career went in high school. I was literally gone more days than I was actually in school. I would only make it on school days to be able to play soccer games because if you weren’t there all day, then you weren’t able to play in the game. I got away with it.

Another point of salvation – this is the power of one, really. She wasn’t even my teacher, Kim Story was her name, she was a teacher that taught another one of the English classes. She found out what was happening, and she was studying to do her speech pathology degree also, and she advocated to get me in her class and to be able to teach me. She, because there were no English learner classes, literally taught me English before school, at lunch, and after school. To the point of sticking her hands in my mouth to help me mould my pronunciation. I think without those two really amazing teachers – teacher and coach – I would not be here today. I was already getting into drugs, getting in fights, getting in tangles with the police, drinking. Without them, there would have been no future for me. But luckily, I met them. Finally, I got recruited to go to Kansas to play for a college soccer team there. The funny thing is, when I got to Kansas, my life opened up. Education became something very important for me because it was the first time I was actually involved with it. I went from being what would be practically a C- student, just enough to be eligible, to an A student at my college, and graduated with honors from St. Mary’s University in Kansas.

Narration: John-Paul thrived in college, as a student and an athlete, but more than his peers, he also occupied another world beyond the campus, working alongside other immigrants struggling to survive.

JPCC: I actually any time I wasn’t playing soccer, I worked at the meatpacking plants. There I developed a lot of friendships. I would say that’s where I began to work with Mexican Americans and other Latinos to organize. I became an organizer in the plants, teaching English and supporting other workers. In some ways, I had two parallel things happening. One is I was learning and doing my academic career, and second I was gaining the skills to be a full fledged organizer in the future by being in the environment of meatpacking plants.

At that time, it was the period of time when meatpacking companies were squishing away workers and taking salary cuts. Meatpacking, when I started, was a really nice paying job, and by the time I ended college, it was a really low paying job. They had pushed out the unions and it was really a time of change. I think in some ways that radicalized me again towards social justice, which I had already brought from Guatemala. It just showed me another face of what it meant to be a minority group in the United States. I began to do a lot of work around immigration, around immigrant rights, language rights. In many ways, that’s where I got my foundation work.

BC: I'm guessing that wasn't what everybody else at St. Mary's was doing during college. It's a pretty unique experience, it sounds like.

JPCC: Oh, no. Especially with five Brazilian roommates, there was [sic] a lot of parties. Really fun, amazing parties with a lot of lambada. You want the stereotype of the Brazilian party? It was my house. It was wonderful, but at the same time I'm always in liminality. I'm always in that middle gray space. I was walking the house at the university and walking the line at the meatpacking plant, and those are two very different worlds.

I remember working next to a lawyer on my left and a doctor on my right from their own countries who could not get jobs in the United States. They come here because either economics or the war itself in El Salvador, but that was my environment that I lived in. I had friendships both with the workers, which was one context, going out to the trailer parks and drinking some beers outside, and having the college partying. Again, walking this weird, strange line in the middle which has always been something interesting for me.

I mean, there's something that fits me very well about it, going back to Guatemala, is that in the Mayan tradition, I am the hummingbird. The hummingbird symbolizes somebody who stays out of things, observes and stands still and is able to observe both worlds but is not part of either one. The hummingbird also in Guatemala is the bridge between the spiritual realm and the human realm, so it's the messenger that goes between. It's always in between. There's something about that liminality that I now own. It's part of who I am.

Narration: After college, and after a brief attempt at professional soccer, John-Paul took a job with Americorps. He lived in inner city Chicago and worked in a program helping gang affiliated youth stay in school. It was his first real immersion in the African American community and an experiential education in the systemic racism of America's housing, schools, and criminal justice systems. After his year in Chicago, he transitioned to a new job working on issues of education and racial justice, moving to another Midwest community with a meatpacking plant struggling with the same sort of transformation, and tension, he had witnessed in Wyoming and Kansas.

JPCC: I got recruited to work in West Liberty, Iowa. I went from very urban to very rural. West Liberty, Iowa was a town that was in the middle of a change. It went from basically no Latinos, to with the construction of a poultry plant and some other meatpacking plants in the area became fifty percent Latino in ten years. A massive growth. A lot of things were changing there. I got recruited to work as the multicultural coordinator and the equity coordinator for the district. I was supposed to help the district work better with the Latino nation. I was, except for one ELL teacher, the first person of color in the district.

A beautiful woman and I got together and we decided that the first bilingual program in Iowa would be in this district. I worked with her a lot and the superintendent at the time and one of the lead ELL teachers. We wrote some grants and eventually got a 3.2 million dollar dual-language grant which allowed us to start teaching English-speaking kids Spanish and Spanish-speaking kids English starting with the first grade up to twelfth grade. We did that. It was a very successful model. The story behind it though is a little bit more difficult in the sense that when we wrote that grant and got those funds, it was an interesting thing that happened. The first feeling of the community was total rejection. I remember the headlines in the West Liberty newspaper talking about the plague. "We can't do this because more will come." and about how these kids are infesting ours. That's what the editorial in the local paper would say. It was a really trying time.

I also learned something about the subtlety about who wins even when you're talking about doing really great movements around work and diversity. There's this whole concept of interest conversion where things only move for communities of color when there's interest in the communities for it to happen. When I was there, I had framed it as a gifted and talented program for the Latino kids. After we got the grant, I was pushed out a little bit and they reframed it as a gifted and talented program for the white kids. When they did that, marketing as a program for white kids to learn Spanish, it all changed and became very popular. While it was good for the Latino kids, one of the things that's interested me and kept my research to this day is that commodification of youth of color where the value of those youth went from this innate value of someone gifted and talented is going to help the community to they're valuable because they'll teach my white kid to speak Spanish and they'll teach my white kid to get along with others. That's an interesting thing that I've played with throughout my career to understand how racism works in the United States. I don't know why I went into that. It's just kind of one of those lessons. I'm thinking back to places that I've worked and what they've taught me.

Narration: John-Paul eventually went back to school, earning a Master of Social Work at the University of Iowa, then co-founding the University's Institute for the Support of Latino/a Families and Communities. One of the Institute's most memorable programs was a kind of study abroad for white Midwestern professionals, to help them develop a better understanding of the experience of Latin American immigrants.

JPCC: We'd take this group of elite people from the United States, teachers, principals, a mixed group of people from different communities. And the first thing I'd have them do when we got there, after they had a nice sleep and everything, we'd go out in the morning to central plaza in this town, an idyllic Mexican, beautiful town. Renowned for its beauty. Not a lot of English speakers. I'd take them there and put them on a day long scavenger hunt where they had to go get all their necessities for things they had to do. Their own toilet paper, groceries and everything. I'd give them a list, put them in groups of three, then say we'd find each other here at five o'clock in the afternoon. That was the beginning of the experience, to drop them off without language skills, without anything, just to try to function in society. That was always the beginning, and every night we would discuss what happened and the activities they did. We'd learn about the schools and talk about what schools looked like. Law enforcement. What's the issues, a lot around agriculture because at that time, Iowa has that whole history around the farm crisis which at that time in Latin America and Mexico they were having the same thing. Small producers were being displaced in great numbers, which was pushing the people north. Did a lot of work like that. The most successful case was – true story – the mayor of Postville. I always had staff and people I hired to help me out to run the program. He met one of the social workers. Over the years, they got married. The mayor of Postville, who was an ultra conversative guy, fell in love with this Mexican social worker who was a radical. Loved her. They became a couple. He changed in so many ways. Eventually, what cost him his mayorship, he had left his party in some ways and left that radical, anti-immigrant population because he could not longer when he loved somebody who was – in some ways, they changed that community.

Narration: I asked John-Paul what he learned from this experience, from accompanying white Midwesterners on these journeys to Mexico.

JPCC: Part of what I learned was kindness towards people who are not understanding the differences, who live in an area of privilege, where they cannot see beyond their own view of the world. They cannot see. It's that really kind person who is amazing with their family and their church or the core of the community but still harbors really negative feelings against people of color and really harbors negative feelings against immigrants. They can be a good person but also have this racist, homophobic instincts. I think what I learned is that they're not one or the other. You don't have people who are either racist or anti-racist. You have conflicts within one person which are both. Does that make sense? One of the things I don't like about the dichotomy that's being put out right now around either you're a racist or an anti-racist is that it doesn't really give voice to the complexity among people. I can be racist in one area but not in another. That's the place of grayness, liminality that I like and we miss that. It gets obfuscated, it gets hidden by the rhetoric that's out there right now. It worries me. Let me give you a very practical example. My father, the deep, ultra conservative, Rush Limbaugh-loving guy who, him and I have a very hard time talking about things like racism and homophobia and things like that, is also the person who will stop in the middle of a country road at midnight to help somebody who's car has broken down, irregardless of the danger and whether they're black or white. My dad is this set of contradictions. He has this bagage that his environment – Alabama, the military – has created, and yet he's a very kind person. I think that at that point, it changed my career trajectory from working exclusively with individuals and trying to change individuals' minds, which I think is important and other folks can do, to looking at systems. How can we change the legacy within systems? How do we change the rules of the game in ways that actually create equity?

Narration: John-Paul travelled to Mexico with white Iowans and came to appreciate their kindness and their contradictions. His career also gave him lots of opportunities to travel to rural communities in Iowa, to understand white Midwesterners in their context, and to understand their attitudes toward immigration.

JPCC: After a while of working in academia, I got asked at that time by Governor Vilsack, who would eventually become Secretary of Agriculture Vilsack to step into his cabinet. Much of the work that he would ask me to do was around immigration. It was around his idea or the idea at the time in Iowa that Iowa should be a new Ellis Island. I know that seems like a million years ago, but I was there when those conversations happened. He, in many ways, would ask me to go out as their ambassador for him to have conversations in rural towns like Storm Lake or very white towns like Maynard, Iowa. I have a love for Maynard, Iowa, so if you hear me talk about it a couple different times, I know some wonderful folks over there. It's the first place I drove a combine. And I began to work with rural, white Iowans around the issue of immigration. It's amazing how the dialogue can change over time and how you enter it. For example, at the beginning I started arguing with folks, and that didn't get me anywhere. Over time I began to listen to their stories around what are their worries, what are their griefs and so forth. The idea that really resonated at the particular time when I was doing the work was the legacy of the farm crisis. The idea that small farms were being lost. It was an echo in Iowa everywhere, which is a very human sense of loss that was continuously happening in Iowa in many ways. This consolidation of farms into super agriculture work. I would spend a lot of time in rural areas having conversations with folks who really did not believe in the things that I did. I spent much time listening. The funny thing is that once you engage folks, for example, I would listen to the stories of the farm crisis. I knew to go there and ask what their experience was. Then I could connect that with what was happening at the time in Mexico with corn prices with US dumping corn, making tortillas so expensive to a crop that actually came from many of the areas. Corn was invented, domesticated by Mayans in Central America and southern Mexico. Making those parallels bringing people together around that. I spent many years trying to find the bridging place between what the perceptions of individuals in those communities were and the perceptions of humanity that immigrants would bring.

Narration: John-Paul is convinced this sort of cross-cultural bridge-building isn't just personal, it is political. This kind of storytelling and organizing can topple unjust systems.

JPCC: Bringing white farmers who are losing their farms together with immigrants under a common cause is really dangerous for systems. It's when we see the biggest changes, because they came together, or the biggest losses because that got squashed. It is no, at least from my perspective and what I've read, it is not an accident that Martin Luther King was killed while trying to bring together white, poor people and African Americans around economic justice. That was a point where there was a lot of risk for people to lose. When we start looking at it that way and we find that we have some commonalities that we address, if we open up that context, if we splay it out, then we can start thinking about how to turn up towards systems, towards the structures, towards the people who actually wield the power, towards the one percenters, to use that particular rhetoric, in ways that actually lead to our own humanity.

Narration: John-Paul is all too familiar with the personal and professional risks of standing up to systems, and working for racial and social justice. From 2014-2018, he served as the state director of Iowa's 4H program. Now 4H is surely one of the most beloved institutions in the Midwest farm belt. Anyone who's been to a county or state fair has seen 4H kids showing off the livestock they've raised, but John-Paul emphasizes the program is really about leadership development and STEM education. And he was hired with the mandate to make sure 4H wasn't just for rural, white farm kids, but also for the children of migrant farm workers and meatpackers, and to expand 4H programs in diverse urban areas.

This was part of a nationwide initiative to diversify 4H, to reflect the changing demographics of the country and especially to serve vulnerable populations including kids with disabilities, incarcerated, and LGBT youth. And it was this last category in particular that proved controversial in Iowa. Under the Obama administration, all federally funded programs received guidance to review policies and practices, and insure they provided an inclusive environment for LGBTQ youth. As Director, John-Paul developed a set of recommendations, in particular adding protections for transgender youth, in alignment with Iowa civil rights law and the policies of the state Department of Education. Iowa 4H posted these recommendations for public comment, and the push back poured in.

In the midst of the process, the newly elected Trump administration reversed federal guidance and instructed programs to eliminate LGBTQ protections. When John-Paul resisted, conservative groups from across the country targeted Iowa and it's proposed policies. And they targeted John-Paul. In news stories and on talk radio, he became the face of change, of the threat to traditional values. His name and personal information circulated on internet message boards. He received hate mail and death threats. John-Paul says all this deepened his conviction, and he refused to remove the recommendations.

JP: I was told to withdraw the proposal. By that time I had thousands of letters that talked about LGBTQ folks as deviants, as predators, as child molesters, because there's this idea that if a gay person goes into the bathroom, then they're immediately a child molester, which is ridiculous. I began to be framed as somebody who supports child molestation because of what gay kids had the ability to change their pronouns without being punished for it. That's how we got to that particular place in time. Eventually, I would lose my job for it. When I was told to take away the guidance, I said, "No, I don't think so. I think these letters, these death threats, this hate mail that I've received is enough to make me believe that these youth have an environment that might be hostile to them, and if I as an adult feel threatened, feel discriminated, feel harassed, because I simply made the suggestion, how are these kids in rural communities feeling?" I stood my ground, and said, "I am going to recommend that we move forward with it." They let me go.

BC: I hear you saying how much you care about changing the systems and also this was really personal. It sounds like it's still really raw. Three years is not that long of a time to still feel how it felt to you.

JPCC: It hurt, it really did. It hurt in so many ways. It hurt to be rejected for the work that I had to do. There's so many things. I also found who my true friends were. I got abandoned by a bunch of people who said they were my friends in college. They just kind of went away. They never called me. I was an embarrassment to them. Then I found some folks in my life who I would not trade for anything. It's amazing how going through the desert shows you who your true friends are. It also helped solidify and understand a new dimension of what was happening and the idea that you can simply change laws and visible things and get a change or a difference in how you're working to address those performative parts and really change how the system works. It's false. You've got to change the system. You change the system sometimes by standing in the way of the system. Sometimes you have to say no. I won't regret. That's a lesson I'll carry with me for the rest of my life. I don't regret saying no. I will not regret saying no. I urge people to say no in these kinds of situations, even if it costs them because what it does is allow for change to actually happen. Maybe not for you, but for the next person.

BC: One of the things that really struck me when you were talking about your work with 4H and this tension around trans rights, your own story of coming here, of learning right away that you as an immigrant did not get to define your own identity, that you didn't get to fill in the bubbles in the test. Even your name wasn't yours to control, that your ethnicity wasn't yours to define. That same effort to control and define and limit people's identities is absolutely still operational. Who gets to choose their pronouns and everything.

JPCC: To borrow a thought, expand on a thought of my really wonderful Chicana scholar, who is to say that stripping somebody of their culture, their language, of their humanity is any less violent than killing them in war? Right? Those things hurt. They dehumanize you to not be allowed to come out of the closet. To be shamed or treated as a child molester simply because you want to fulfil who you are as a person. To love who you want to love. To me, that is really problematic.

Narration: John-Paul has experienced the dehumanizing violence of having his own identity stripped away, and the dehumanizing violence against trans youth whose identities are under attack in 4H. And he has struggled with the resulting sense of isolation, being cut off from one's true self and cut off from the dominant culture. Even as he has embraced living and leading from the gray areas, he also knows how painful and problematic it is to be pushed to the margins, to be told you have no place here.

But John-Paul has managed to make a home in the Midwest, and like other immigrants, one of the most important ways he has established his place here is through the support of family, who have moved here from other parts of the U.S. to live in Iowa. As he's worked so hard to build bridges across cultures, these family connections have been essential.

JCC: We are the prototype of the immigration story of Iowa. I came here for a job and part of the reason I came here for my job in West Liberty, Iowa – I moved here from Chicago – was because my parents had gotten a job here also, and they were working in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. My parents and I moved to Iowa around the same time to come together. We both were new to Iowa. After that, my sister married a nice white boy from Iowa and had kids and so forth. I met this wonderful, amazing Chicana, Mexican American, from the Bay Area. She moved here from the Bay Area. She calls that true love. After that, after she moved here, her sister came with her kids and moved here. After that, her brother came, and then her mother came. And that's how we here in Iowa have created a whole community of Latinos, our family. We jokingly say that we're responsible for half the immigration to Iowa from Latinos all over the United States. It's not true, but we have really kind of made Iowa our home as a family.

If you're an immigrant, almost by definition, you have been uprooted. I want you to use the image of a tree being uprooted and placed in different soil. Why wouldn't you want to find soil that's similar to yours where you can have the social connections. One of the traumas about immigration or being a refugee or coming to asylum is that you're uprooted. Putting roots down is something that's communal; you put roots where you feel comfortable, where you feel you can make a difference, where you feel you can move forward. Iowa, for a lot of years, had that identity of being a wonderful place where people could come and build families. That's changed in the last few years, and I'm really sorry to hear that. The politics in Iowa changed in a way where it's much more difficult to feel at home now than it used to be. I'm really sorry about that because Iowa is a place where there's so many kind people. There's a common decency. I think it's changing in a way that makes it much more difficult to live. As of recently, my family and I have been talking about maybe we need to move out of Iowa because it doesn't feel safe anymore.

BC: What do you think has changed?

JPCC: I think the political environment has changed quite a bit. I think it's changed in a way that I used to hear the conversations about Iowa being the new Ellis Island whether you were republican or democrat. I remember Governor Robert Ray making a place welcoming to refugees. That's not the case anymore. Iowa is an English-only state. Iowa is finding ways − Iowa used to be such a wonderful place for civil rights. There's so much history about Kat's Drug Store right here in Des Moines, and having the first African American attend college, and yet for some reason I see that shifting. I hope that the Iowa that I came to love remains the Iowa it is, but I'm a little bit worried it's shifting in a different direction. If that happens, both in the metaphorical sense − do we feel emotionally safe, emotionally connected to our community − and here's a person who's received death threats for trying to promote diversity. That scares me and the future for my beautiful Latina daughter. I have to really look at how I protect her, how do I put her in an environment where she'll be safe. I know a lot of Iowans believe Iowa is the safest place in the world, and it's true if you're white. If you're African American, a person of color, it feels less safe today than it did ten years ago.

Narration: Thanks for listening to Mid-Americana. And a special thanks to John-Paul for sharing his story.

Next time, Josh speaks with Hem Rizal. Hem's family fled the country of Bhutan when he was just a year old. His brothers carried him on their backs to a refugee camp in Nepal, where Hem's family lived for more than a decade before immigrating to the U.S. Hem speaks about the burden he carries as a refugee living two lives – his own and the life his father never got to live.

He finds inspiration in Toni Morrison’s idea that if you’ve made it in life, you have a duty to help those who haven’t yet found their place. This calling drew Hem to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, where he taught for four years, to the Black Lives Matter movement in Des Moines, where he has participated as an organizer, and to the Harvard Kennedy School, where he is now pursuing a master’s degree in public policy.

You can find transcripts and show notes for this, and all our episodes, on our website, midamericana.com, which also features original illustrations for each episode by artist Mathew Kelly.

If you like our show, please recommend us to your friends and rate and review us wherever you listen to podcasts. John-Paul Chaisson-Cardenas’s story was produced by me and Josh Dolezal, and edited by Brad Linder. The theme music for Mid-Americana was written and produced by Adam Bruce. Mid-Americana is supported by Central College, Humanities Iowa, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Thoughts aired on our show do not necessarily represent the views of Central College, Humanities Iowa, or the National Endowment for the Humanities.