

Guest: John-Paul Chaisson-Cardenas
Interviewer: Brian Campbell

Location: Des Moines, IA
Date: July 23, 2020

BC: So, tell me your name just so I make sure I'm getting the pronunciation totally right.

JCC: John Paul Chaisson Cardenas.

BC: Is there a story to that at all – to your name?

JCC: Except for that I cut it down. It used to be longer. When I got married, I cut it down because 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, but my wife is also Cardenas. I took hers, but it just replaced mine. Then my family name is Anzueto, from my grandmother. It used to be very long, and when I got married it just became John Paul, one name, and Chaisson Cardenas, last name.

BC: Even just in your name, you're piecing together lots of different parts of your story.

JCC: Yeah.

BC: Where do you want to start with some of that? Tell me about your family name – your grandmother's name.

JCC: My grandmother, in many ways, raised me because my mom was always working, so her and I were very close. That's the name that I take and love to her. It's not a legal name, but it's a remembrance of where I come from. That's kind of an important name for me. My grandmother was my love. My dad had already immigrated to the United States. He was from the United States, and my mom and my dad were separated for a good chunk of the time I was growing up. Really, I grew up around these beautiful, powerful, amazing women, including my aunt, Ana, who was another person in my life today who's somebody I adore and really respect. Women really forged me. I am the product of these powerful women. I'm very honored at that. Including my wife and my daughter.

BC: Tell me about the place you grew up. Where were these powerful women who raised you?

JCC: I was in Guatemala, Central America. 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, again, 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 pigmentation had turned clear and you could see the darkness of the organs through the skin because the child 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. 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 – in Guatemala, literacy rates (at the time and now) continue to be very, very high. What would happen is that we would help especially Indian women, not all speaking 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.

BC: You encountered poverty in the city and rural areas. What about in your own family? What was your family like?

JCC: We were definitely not rich. We weren't even middle class, to be honest. We were lower middle- to lower class in our community. I come from a history of women leaders. My grandmother wasn't married. It's just kind of this history of women. But with that comes lower status, especially since my father had left. My mom was trying to maintain a semblance of normality for us. She worked a morning job at an institute for English teaching and secretarial work, and in the afternoon she was the principal of a national academy, and she'd work odd jobs all the time. My mom was working constantly. We also lived in a part of the city which is called Zona Tres, which at the time was on the borderline of the really rough neighborhoods. Now it's completely enveloped by that. It's an area where even the police don't go anymore. We lived at the margins in many ways. Enough money to where we never hungered, but we also were not in any sort of middle- or upper class.

BC: It sounds like you had a real sense of concern and commitment to caring for others, for social justice from your family.

JCC: Yeah. My family has always been involved in issues of social justice, especially around indigenous peoples. I think partly because my family, which is indigenous by – they're Mayan – by descendance, 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.

BC: Do you remember some things about family life, your household growing up that exemplified that tension or that transition from indigenous to colonial worlds?

JCC: I can talk about Guatemala overall. I think it's an analogy for or a metaphor for how Guatemalans perceive spirituality. In Guatemala after the Spanish conquest, they would come and literally put Catholic churches on top of Mayan temples. They would put Catholic churches on top of Mayan temples. To become Catholic was the sign of being domesticated for the Mayan Indians by the Spanish. It was their lives that were at play if they did not become domesticated in some ways. But because I think Europeans, and Spanish as part of that, have this idea that you're either one or the other. Mayans, Native Americans, do not. The difference in between having just one god that you have to serve and having many deities that you can work with and negotiate with is very different. Over time in Guatemala, the syncretization happened where the saints and Mary and even Jesus at different times because meshed. They became overlaid by Mayan spirituality. The spirituality in Guatemala is really a representation of that. Even to the point, just to be very symbolic, is that many of the statues of the saints and the virgin Mary which present, a lot of them are made of paste of corn, but in the center they would a lot of times sneak in and put artifacts from Mayan deities in there. There is no reason why you can't do both at the same time. You can pray to a saint for advocacy and it can be your deity, and it can also be the Mayan representation of a particular god. It created a space of liminality. Yeah, you're performing Catholicism, but it's something different. The other thing is that in Guatemala, there was [sic] two different major trends in the Catholic church. One was very progressive, kind of led and really exemplified the values of liberation theology. Then there's the ultra conservative church that was aligned with the government and especially the military of the United States. Those two ways of looking at the Catholic church were really contextual to where I lived in that particular time. It was a time of war. Everything was, in many ways, either you were part of the government structure and the authoritarians, or you were their enemy. If you were speaking against the government in any way, then you were the enemy of the state.

BC: You were saying you went to a Catholic school that was more aligned with the government/military tradition?

JCC: No, the contrast it presented military – in fact, we wore white uniforms that looked like Navy uniforms and marched – but the 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 one of the reasons eventually my mother would be, because she was part of the teacher's unions, at risk. It is a major part of why we wound up in the United States.

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

JCC: 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 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 [sic]. 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.

BC: It sounds like your mother at least knew those risks were great and there were ways to get away from that, to leave.

JCC: Yeah, we had to leave because my mom was under threat. It was not a planned departure. We left basically with our suitcases. We got on a plane and we came to the United States. Luckily, we had my father, who – my mom and my dad were separated at the time – but I will always commend my father because when he found out that we needed to leave, he came. He did. He physically picked us up. That's something I'm very grateful and always will be grateful for my dad. I don't think if we would have had that connection, that facility, if we had to come to the United States it would have been a much tougher process. But because he was a US citizen and had done the paperwork for my sister and I to be US citizens and my mom a resident, our journey was a lot simpler because of that. We didn't have to do the undocumented thing for a long time like many folks do who are fleeing the war or wars in other places. But everything else, we did have to survive. The poverty, the rejection once you get here, the racism that pops up. The reality is that we didn't have to deal with the citizenship.

BC: Why don't you go back and tell me a little bit about your father and how your parents came together.

JCC: 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, a Navy photographer in, I believe he was a security guy or an intelligence guy who did aerial photography and those types of things. He was deployed on aircraft carriers as a Vietnam veteran. He is a, I would call him ultra conservative, white guy from Alabama. That's my dad's side. 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 he 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.

JCC: 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.

BC: Were you born in Guatemala then?

JCC: I was born actually in Albany, Georgia. But I moved to Guatemala before I had memory, so I am a US citizen by birth, but I am very much a Guatemalan by culture.

BC: And your other siblings?

JCC: My sister is eight years younger than I am, and she was born in Guatemala. However, when we came to the United States, most of her older cognizant years are really in the United States. We always joke with her that while she was born in Guatemala, she's more from the United States, and while I was born in the United States, I'm more from Guatemala. It's one of those family jokes.

BC: What do you remember about that journey? You said your mom felt like pretty suddenly you had to pack up and leave. What do you remember about that?

JCC: 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 time of the dark wars. That's when people who were advocating simply would get picked up by black 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 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, and I don't remember much of the drive except the novelty of driving next to the mountains in Colorado and stuff like that, 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. But that's where I did my high school.

BC: You said Cheyenne was rapidly changing. Meatpacking had come in, and some of your first friends in the US in Cheyenne were other immigrants, other Latinos, but not just Latinos.

JCC: Yeah. 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 saw me playing 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. That was how I wound up at Central, the across-town rival from East, the school where I was not supposed to go. 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 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. Because I was good enough, I got recruited to go to a couple Division 1 schools, however, my grades weren't good enough. 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.

BC: What do you mean, "opened up"? What changed for you?

JCC: A couple different things. This was the first time I'd seen a Latino in power. The soccer coach was a Chilean guy. Most of the team was a bunch of Latinos who'd been recruited to come play, mostly Brazilians who had come to play for the soccer team. I was in a place where for the first time in the United States, I'd seen Latinos, people like me, have a say so. The second thing is I told you a little bit about how I was tested and not allowed to take any mathematics in high school. When I got to college on the entrance exams, I took the placement exam for it, and actually moved all the way up to calculus because in Guatemala I had had that much math. The ability to do math has nothing to do with language but the stereotype of me not speaking the language – of people not speaking the language being dumb – was so predominant that people were not able to see that I was actually smarter than what was represented on that one test, or their stereotypes of who I am. Because somebody from Guatemala could not have an education better than someone in the United States. But yeah I did really well. Through my college career, I actually was a really good student. Every year, I got better, and that's actually continued, and now I'm finishing my doctorate degree, getting ready to do comprehensives and dissertations. Every year I've gotten a little better at school. My grades keep on going up and up and up. It's amazing how in the later part of my life I'm actually a better student than I was when I first started my career.

BC: So what did you study in college?

JCC: Everything. Anything I could get my hands on. Really where I landed was around social justice again and culture, so forth. I graduated with a major in sociology and a major in multicultural education/international studies. I was a liberal arts major. And a minor in Spanish language. That was what I graduated from from my undergrad. The thing that was different aside from playing soccer full time, and at that division level they can give you the full scholarship, but they could not give you living expenses and so forth. I had my living expenses, actually. That other stuff you need, 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 and 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.

JCC: 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.

BC: At that time, the meatpacking plant was primarily Latinos? You were around lots of other Latinos?

JCC: Yeah. A lot of Latinos. A lot of Salvadorians. Very few Guatemalans at that particular one. A lot of Mexicans. 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.

BC: After college, you had a foot in these different worlds. Where did you go next?

JCC: I tried to play professional soccer, and that didn't go well. One, I was probably not good enough. I had this desire to play soccer. I loved it; however, going to a lower division school, I did not have the anchors to be able to do it. That took me a couple different places but really didn't go anywhere. I decided to enlist with Americorps with Action Vista. I wanted to go to the Peace Corps, but I didn't want to commit two years. I got a placement in inner city Chicago working with gang prevention. I would work in the street corners with gang affiliated youth to try to help them navigate the system and stay in school in a way where they would get out. I went from college to working in neighborhoods like Humboldt Park, Taylor Holmes, and in the inner city of Chicago, schools that were very racialized and you had to go through metal detectors to get in every day, etc., etc. It was a new shift. It was a new learning opportunity for me to do that. It also, in some ways, kept on deepening that social justice heart I already had in a way that started looking at how other minority groups – this was the place where I had the most contact with African Americans, a community that welcomed me, that appreciated me for the work that I was doing, where I created a lot of friends and began to learn about the civil rights movement, where I began to learn about the historical precedent after Jim Crow and into racism of today. At the same time about the legal system, how it supports some and does not support others. It was a great job. I learned an amazing amount by simply being able to be in a company of youth struggling to get their education.

BC: You've continued to work with young people quite a bit.

JCC: Yeah, my passion is for youth. There is no way around it. There are two things that frame my work. One is social justice, anti-racism or pro-immigration work. The second one is that I love youth. There is something about youth that steals my heart. It's the work of my life. It's my life's work.

BC: How much of that is about your own experience of adolescence? You moved here in your early teens and had quite a struggle through high school.

JCC: I never thought of it that way, but I think that's a very insightful thing you're saying. I'd say adolescence is liminality by definition. I feel very comfortable in liminality, and I think youth are in that space where they experience so many things, but they're not quite adults and they're not quite children anymore. It's a beautiful space of liminality.

BC: So you had this experience in Chicago, learned a lot about race in America. What next for you?

JCC: 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. That shaped my life in the sense of bringing me deeper into the educational arena and see what's happening in our schools and ways to change the schools. We did an amazing amount of work around moving that particular community from a place of division into a place where there was at least a recognition of the changing demographics of the country. Probably the thing I'm most proud of aside from the students themselves – I still keep in contact with a lot of them, my first ones, my *mariposa* group of young women who I did a lot of work with – was that I had the opportunity to figure out that professionally I could make a difference by thinking differently than mainstream thought. 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 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.

BC: That's fascinating and even linked to your own experience of getting recruited as an athlete and soccer is certainly something where Latinos are looked at as a commodity in a certain way. That was true for you as well.

JCC: Yeah. You're absolutely right. There's a strange commodification of athletes, especially athletes of color. They bring millions of dollars into university programs. The question is, what do we get out of it? That's a really interesting trade off. Kind of a side thing, I was actually a

baseball player in Guatemala, but when I got to the United States, I sucked so bad. I was a mediocre soccer player in Guatemala, but in the US I was really good.

BC: Say more about that. You played baseball and soccer as a kid? What was sports like for you in Guatemala?

JCC: The city is a jungle of cement. There's little green space, especially in poor areas where we lived. I'll just talk about soccer a little bit. Our soccer place was actually the paved courtyard of a school. We didn't have grassy space to play. The other thing is, I played soccer in the streets every day because we couldn't afford balls so we'd ball these plastic balls that we'd play with, or we'd literally wrap socks around things and that's how we played soccer. Soccer was my – that's what we did. For me, soccer and chess were the two things I did as a kid, which is an awkward combination. It's either playing soccer in the streets or playing chess in the streets.

BC: You found other people to play chess with as well?

JCC: Lots of people play chess in Guatemala. Those were the two things. Every neighborhood has its own flavor. Soccer was everywhere, but chess was more in the neighborhood where I lived. Baseball, however, was something my mom tried to get me in to get me out to green spaces. We'd have to drive almost an hour to practice three times a week or I'd have to take the bus for two hours to get there. Baseball in Guatemala, which is not very common, has a much higher price, so you have to have some money to play baseball. That was her way of trying to create some cultural capital for me, I guess. I was in Guatemala and an okay baseball player, but the skill level in the United States was so much higher. Soccer was something common in Guatemala, but in the United States, especially Cheyenne, Wyoming at the time, it was a novelty. It really wasn't to the extent that it is now. Soccer has increased in quality in the United States. Sadly enough, that increase in quality has also exited kids like me. It's become a middle class to upper class sport, and a sport that's so cheap to play in Guatemala, you can play it anywhere, is so expensive to play in the United States. I don't understand that. It has led me to kind of separate for a little bit from US soccer, except women's soccer, which I idolize. The women of the United States are amazing, so women's soccer I will follow. Men's soccer... you know.

BC: We can take a break too, if you'd want.

JCC: Completely up to you. I'm a storyteller. Up to you. Wherever you lead me, I have a story.

BC: How long were you in West Liberty?

JCC: I think it was four years I was in West Liberty. I think it was around that range. I left West Liberty because I had a professor from the University of Iowa school of social work which I met actually at one of the things I did in West Liberty, I started diversity multicultural day trying to bring folks from the University. Everybody talked about inclusion as a negative thing you had to do, so I tried to give it a lighter tone. I didn't have the skill to know the different levels of intervention, so that was an easy way to bring some folks. When I met her, she was our first

keynote speaker. She recruited me to go do my Master's at the University of Iowa Master's of Social Work, which I did. I loved doing it there with her. She became part of my family. To this day, one of the things I did because I met this amazing professor, and really the influence of women of color and people of color in my life has been – this woman, I named my daughter after her because she was such an influence on me. She gave me my career and pointed me in the direction to be able to do what I wanted to do. The thing is, I didn't know what that was until I met her. To this day, we stay in touch. She's my mentor. Any time I have to make a professional decision, I pick up the phone and call her. She's an amazing, amazing woman. She married us, me and my wife. She's a Unitarian associate pastor for Cedar Rapids. When I was doing my practicum for school, for my master's work, I did it at this place called the National Resource Center Family Center Practice, so it's just part of the University. It was a research center through federal funding that was doing work around child welfare across the United States and specifically at the time they had a grant for the transition after welfare was changed. I began there as a practicum student, and over the years I became the national director of training and technical assistance. All fifty states I'd work with, and a couple different territories. I got to really solidify my work in the area of inclusion, of diversity, of equity. I began to work there for a long time. I started a couple other research centers. A friend of mine, Brad, and some other folks, we started, in Iowa, the work around disproportionate minority confinement. In other words, youth being treated unequally in the state of Iowa. Youth of color, when it came to the juvenile justice system. Work that continues today. We started Latino Institute, working with Mexico. We'd take professionals from rural communities like the mayor of Postville and the sheriff of Maynard and we'd take them to Mexico for a week or two and literally drop them off and have them experience what an immigrant would experience if they came to another country and doing work around that.

BC: Drop them off and experience what you did.

JCC: The first activity, 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, 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 conservative 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, that cost him his mayorship, he had left his party in some ways and left that radical, anti-immigrant population because he could no longer when he loved somebody who was – in some ways, they changed that community.

BC: While doing this work, what are some ways you saw change in these community leaders? What did they take away from this sort of experience?

JCC: Some of them did. Not all. Some would come back with reinforced vigor. The most effective way to teach differences in culture and race is to have people get to know in positive ways, other people who are living those experiences. 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 baggage 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? I did that because of two things. One is I don't have to sit there and say you're a good person or a bad person because it's not about you. It's not about an individual. It's about the structures. And two is the understanding that many times, the systems that are there and the way organizations are created weren't even created by the people that are there. They're just maintaining things that were created over time. Where people get caught is we've always done this this way. We've always had this policy rather than look at it with a critical equity lens and say, hey, we might have had it that way, but were the roots really to stop other people from being able to access it or be part of it? Or looking at a community that's saying we've always been like that and problematizing that and saying, when did it become a community like this? Did redlining have something to do with that? Where does the land come from? Is Iowa State University a land grant university which was created for

the people actually for the people or was it for some people? Were the land grants at the same being given to white settlers to be able to do the work at the same time they were being stripped away from Native Americans who actually owned the land at that particular time. It's kind of asking those questions and shifting that idea of how people look at the world so you can have a broader discussion.

BC: It's interesting because I asked you about what you saw these people learning that you accompanied, and you ended up talking as much about what you learned and learning to be kind and gracious and towards them. Even as someone as yourself who had been beaten up by the cowboys and you experienced some of that racism yourself, you learn, it sounds like, quite a bit from being able to be close to some of those people and their struggles.

JCC: Yeah, I agree. I learned so much from them. I learned about how they look at the world and so forth. I also feel less comfortable speaking for them. I don't feel it's my story. If you ever want, I can connect you with some of those folks for them to be able to tell you a story, but it's not my story to tell. I saw a lot of changes in people, but that's, again, not my story to tell. That's their story to tell.

BC: It sounds like part of what you've learned in your life is that there are plenty of white Midwesterners who have misconceptions of what Latin America is like, what Latin Americans are like, what the immigrant experience is, but you're saying there's also lots of misconceptions about what those folks are like. You learned to understand better what it's like to be a white American adjusting to change.

JCC: Yeah. I think one of the jobs that really taught me that was 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 in a centenarian farm. 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. I made a lot of really great friends in rural areas, learned a lot about agriculture, learned a lot about the organizations that support them, about structures in rural areas, and continued doing that work. After that, I got recruited to go to Northwest Area Foundation where I would lead initiatives in rural communities that were changing very fast. I continued that work that I learned in Iowa, but in states like Montana and Idaho and Washington. It was always the same story of loss in rural areas, of fear, of being isolated and feeling left out. But what always would happen is that where one of the ways I think racism and some of these feelings play out is that when they've got time to really examine the structures that create those losses, things like multinational corporations really cheating the system in ways that take away the farms from those Iowa farmers and so forth, or looking at trade deals and what they have done, they almost have a blind spot on that because it was easier to blame the immigrant. They would blame the immigrant for taking the jobs without understanding that context. One of the things I think I learned from those conversations is that somehow we have to teach a wider context of what's happening. We had to move from a local US-centric view of what was happening to a global, more comprehensive view of how the world is run and try to tie those up. I'm still working on that. I'm still working on post colonial stuff, the critical race stuff. That, I think, is an unexamined question. How do we disinvest communities who have power or a certain amount of power – they're not the most powerful; they're somewhere in the middle – from, instead of looking down and oppressing themselves, from others who lose power turn upwards and question what's going on from the structures themselves. That one I haven't figured out, but I think that one is critical for what we need to do, to look at it how the power structures, how systems are set up to cheat everybody and put some groups against others rather than looking at what is actually happening.

BC: It sounds like part of what you've tried and what you've seen work in at least some contexts is helping white westerners, American farmers, helping them learn from the experience of immigrants, from other places. To see those dynamics in a different locality makes it more obvious how we're connected to these bigger global systems.

JCC: Yes, that's a wonderful way of saying it. I would also add the risks of not looking at those. Let me give you an example of the risks. I spoke about coming from Guatemala where black vans would pull up and through you in the van and you'd never be seen again. I cannot tell you how much that echoes to Portland, Oregon today. If you understand that the people in Guatemala who would put those people, those paramilitary groups, that would take citizens off the street and throw them in vans to never be seen again, were trained by US CIA in the school of Americas, then you'd understand that there is a risk that those strategies will be used in the United States. I think that there is a certain amount of naivety in the United States in the sense that we think the arc of progress will always go towards democracy, towards justice. I am not

convinced that's necessarily so. I think if we're going to have justice, democracy, equity in the United States, it's an ongoing battle with every day. It's a hard thing to do.

BC: If we normalize those practices at our own borders or in our military practices around the world, as you say, it's not surprising that those come back here and in certain ways, they become normalized in our context.

JCC: I think it's an arc. I think we invented the technologies that were used overseas. One of the things, being a scholar of history, you start looking at is the times that we invented some of those things, launched them overseas, then they come back. Let me give you a couple of examples. Slavery is one that we really perfected in the United States and it came back. Eugenics was actually US scholars trying to justify slavery. It got picked up by Germany and European scholars, and then we had Nazi Germany and so forth, and then it came back to the United States through Jim Crow and through the effects – you know what I mean. We have these ideas that lead us to believe that things will always be moving towards progress, but I don't believe that is true. I think the individual actions that we have as people today will make a difference tomorrow. Unless we stand up and say this thing is wrong, then we cannot do it. That's a really hard thing to do, because everything is set up for you not to do that, to be quiet and silenced. Much like if you have somebody who is in a situation of domestic violence, the threat of violence is more important than the actual violence itself. In other words, the threat keeps you under control most of the time. When a perpetrator uses violence is when they're starting to lose control. The same thing with child abuse. The same thing with so many things. Isolation, being isolated from each other, coming together and organizing, 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 display 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.

BC: The visionary in you in coming out. The lessons it sounds like you've learned from generations of strong women and others.

JCC: I am who I am. I am who I am, and I've paid dearly for it at different times, but it doesn't change who I am.

BC: One of the systems that I know you've worked hard to help change is through your work with 4H.

JCC: I don't want to talk about that.

BC: Okay. We won't talk about that at all.

JCC: Let's talk around it. Okay. Yeah I work with 4H, which was an awkward job for me. I got brought in because at that time, Kathryn Kress believed some change was needed to happen in 4H for inclusion, bringing in youth who had not been part of the program for many years in ways that hadn't been – because they hadn't had access to this wonderful program. I actually love 4H in many ways. I love the philosophy between 4H because it is really a youth development program. It looks at things like health and health communities and looks at things like being able to be a leader in your community and what does that mean. It looks at STEM, which I am a fan of STEM, and it looks at art and communications, so it's a really comprehensive program. But it has had a history, a legacy, of not fulfilling those particular, very altruistic goals. It does because it has some entrenchment in structures. For example, I remember a couple different conversations I had when I took over as director of Iowa 4H where people had concerns. I remember talking to a peer at a different level, and their major concern was that as I worked to change 4H, I would move it away from being a leadership program to being an at-risk program. That's something I heard a lot of times. As I sat down with this person, who was a really nice person, to unpack that, what this person meant was that we have kids who are already leaders. They're mostly white, rural, they're agriculture. Not only agriculture, but they're producers of some sort. That's who they're talking about. We should be grooming them instead of bringing other kids. As we explored the other kids, what was in this particular person's mind – but I think it also speaks to the organization itself – is the idea that race, that ethnicity, that language somehow makes you at risk. That not being like those kids makes you at risk. In other words, there was an equation between being a leader and being white, Christian, nationalistic, well-spoken, and rural in a particular sector of the agricultural arena while kids such as the kids of migrant workers or the kids of people who work in meatpacking plants were not even considered part of the agricultural sector because they were mostly minority kids. They weren't doing the "traditional farming" kind of work. They were more interested in doing things that have to do with the actual labor of farming. There was this line that divided the producers, the kids of the farmers or the rural kids, all of them white really, very few of them of color, from those other kids when it came to those of who belonged in the program. That really was difficult for me to swallow, but it is something that is an unwritten rule of 4H. I'm not the first one to talk about it. I've heard national directors talk about it. I've heard this is something that's been researched and kind of looked at quite a bit. I joined a national movement from 4H to try to change 4H. There was a lot of resistance, including death threats to trying to make those changes because what happens is that if you try to make those changes. It comes down to the money too. People don't know that when you participate in traditional programs in 4H, there's a lot of money that changes hands, whether it's after you get a blue ribbon, you're able to send your cow or pig for thousands of thousands of dollars, to how people get sponsored and what type of animal you're able to purchase, what kind of stock and so forth. And yes, there's programs that help navigate some of that, but the reality is that money has everything to do with 4H competitions. The other things that people didn't realize is that in Iowa, while the rural population is decreasing, especially the rural white population is decreasing, the program was staying steady when it came to funding. It meant that more rural kids were getting more money because there were

less kids to serve. We had some areas of the state that had as much funding for a county that had 60 members than for Polk County where there were thousands and thousands of members and we had to realign those resources to be where kids were. There's definitely places where populations are growing or not growing, so it moved those things around. That was the resistance, this idea of entitlement. Because I had been 4 generations of 4H and you're taking away my stuff to give it to those non-leaders, not people like me. It created a whole set of structural things. That was my work. That's the place I got dumped to do my work. I did some great work. We began to double the number of kids of color and so forth. We began to make spaces available for LGBTQ kids and so forth. In some places, it eventually came back to bite me. There is a lot of language, especially with academic institutions, places like universities and schools, that talk about the performance of diversity. That means I will perform diversity, I'll use the right words, I'll have a mission statement that includes diversity, I'll hire one or two people of color, but they really do not want change. They don't want to change anything. They want things to stay as they are. If you are a good diversity worker, you won't change anything, you'll just have a diversity party every few months and really nothing's going to change, but we'll look good, and we'll get all the brown kids and black kids to stand in a picture. Now it looks like if I had a bunch of kids of color who were all equally included and happy here, when the reality of the organization is quite different. It might be a really oppressive place. I think the University of Iowa and Iowa State right now are going through that example of that exact same phenomena where there's been a lot of lip service paid to diversity but the reality is that they continue to use the people who are actually trying to make change. In the case of the University of Iowa, what is it now, three, four, five of the diversity folks at the institution are simply gone. We see this everywhere. It's in almost every institution. What level of performance they're playing is maybe different, but changes to structure are really hard and many times, frowned upon.

BC: You were brought in with this mandate to help change, create a culture of change, be more welcoming of diverse kids and ways the state was changing, but when it came time to actually change the structure there was pretty stiff persistence.

JCC: Yeah. Incredible resistance. You start moving dollars over to places to actually do a difference for kids who are excluded, or you start changing policies, and that's when it hits you. That's when you actually see change happening. That's when you actually see the resistance hit you in the face. Quite frankly, to me, that's what happened in many ways. Mine was exacerbated because I had the cabinet of a sitting US president, Trump, really chime in and oppose LGBTQ, especially transgender students, from being included in 4H because it's a federal program. It's federal dollars. They run through state institutions. That created a political incentive to make it very challenging for me to be able to continue the movement. Because I had proposed the changes here in Iowa it was seen that there was a need for a scapegoat, someone who needed to be punished for violating the rules of actually doing diversity work, of actually meaning it and actually mobilizing it, not just performing it. I think that's a lot of what happened with me, is that I actually was doing something, and I paid for it.

BC: And some of those changes were happening nationally in the prior administration, there was policy shifting in 4H. You and Iowa implemented those, and then those were pulled back, correct?

JCC: Yeah, I actually got caught in a place, what I recommended, and you've got to remember that these were recommendations that were going to the public to get their feedback. They weren't actually policy changes. As a matter of fact, the policy never changed. Only the recommendations around the policy, how they would be implemented. The policy is set by Iowa State University and state and federal law. Those were never asked to be changed. We were given instruction that, for example, if a kid wanted to change the pronoun in their name, they could do so, and we would change it in our records to make whatever it is. That, to me, is already a state law. That's not something that really changed. But I think the idea that somebody had to be, I lost what I was going to say. I'm sorry. I think one of the things that happened though is that the right thing to do under diversity has become so politicized, and I mean political in a sense of republican or democrat, that this proposal was seen as a violation of the agenda that the current federal administration was trying to move forward. Oh, I remember now. What happened, I wasn't the only one who was punished for this, by the way. The national director for 4H was also exited from her position. That's something that people don't talk about because it's not very well known. But I am convinced that she was ousted because of it. But what had happened is that the Obama administration had created administrative rules including LGBTQ youth in all federal programs, in schools, etc. We began to propose the rule changes at the local level under the federal guidance that was already there. What happened though is that Vice President Pence and President Trump were at the time removing all the LGBTQ guidance from the work that was happening in the different federal agencies. DeVoss, for example, eliminated all the LGBTQ protections in K-12 schools, a constant attack on Title IX. In agriculture, the cabinet members were pushing to eliminate those from all programs also, all the protections for federal workers. That happened in the middle of the process. When that happened, we had already started our process. By the time it finished, those rules had been removed. The other thing that happened is that we had a nationally recognized hate group from the south – i don't even remember where exactly in the south – came after us. Came after me by name. They began to put news articles and letters to the editor and radio shows depicting me and a person from Idaho and a couple others, but the one that really stuck was Iowa. Iowa has been, for many years, the flagship of the 4H program nationally. And that particular hate group, those messages began to repercalate in the conservative places here in Iowa. That's how it became an explosion of things. It became front page news and so forth. Then eventually that would lead to me losing my job because 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: How long ago was that?

JCC: It's been like three years now. Three years. I'm still working through the legal process. One of things that's happened in Iowa and federally under this administration that people don't know is that while the laws are still there, the resources to actually enforce those laws have been stripped. Processes that used to take a year now take three, four, five years, kind of like if you're applying for a visa in the United States, you cannot expect to get your visa before nine, ten, eleven years because there is such a backlog on things. Some day, I'm pretty sure we will receive justice for this particular situation, but because there are so few resources right now dedicated to and looking at civil rights overall, it just takes years and years and years to be able to move things forward and actually get some response when a civil rights violation has happened.

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.

JCC: 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. That's something that's very personal. I would put the Unitarian Church in that category as a place that I found some great support. It really helped. 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: So, you're saying even though that policy – you knew that either way the policy was going to get changed back, or your proposal was not going to get implemented, that this administration was going to be hostile to trans rights, but by taking a stand, you at least could demonstrate something about the need for a change in the culture within that system of 4H and within the Midwest overall.

JCC: You said it much better than I did, so yes. I think by saying no, you are creating a space where dialogue must be had. Where you have to have a debate about it. If you just go along, swallow it, and don't say no – which many people do. I talk to people all the time who are actively being discriminated against at their job, at school, so forth. But it's too difficult, there's too many risks to actually file the claim, actually say, "This is wrong." Those risks are real. If you stand in the way of many systems, they will chew you up and eat you out. It's that against you. But unless you stand there, no change will come. Not all change can be done by asking please. Some change has to happen with some amount of conflict, whether it's the court system or something else, there has to be a challenge to the status quo in order to see change. Every movement has seen that. Women getting the vote was an uneasy process. It's not like if they asked for the vote, they simply got it. It's a process of marching in the streets and advocating in the courts. Getting civil rights implemented in the United States was not an act of asking for please. Martin Luther King had to march, we had to see the violence perpetrated on black bodies before it actually changed things. While I don't advocate for violence, I understand that racism, sexism, homophobia are acts of violence, and you have to defend yourself from them. Sometimes that means standing even though you're being beat.

BC: These movements are not always so connected, but it sounds like within 4H and your other work, you really saw the connection between the rights of immigrant kids and the rights of kids who are labeled at-risk for being other, alongside those kids who are LGBTQ.

JCC: It's amazing that people say that, but if you start pulling back a little bit, all of these things are connected. I talked a little bit about the United States and me coming to the United States as an immigrant. That's connected to the history of the United States. Let's take the year 1954, a really important year in the United States. Brown v. Board of Education was occurring. What people don't know is that Eisenhower was having a really strong debate at that time. What was happening was because of Jim Crow laws, the United States was losing its social capital overseas. It was starting to create this empire, this idea of the United States being a superpower, but it lacked credibility because how could a country leading toward democracy treat its own citizens, African Americans, in this way? Brown v. Board of Education and the civil rights movement gains there weren't only gained by looking at what was happening in the states. It had an international aspect to it. Black eye kind of issue for the US government. That's the only reason the fed government actually got involved. But you've also got to think, in 1954, it's the same year that the United States decided to invade Guatemala. It invaded Guatemala because a democratically elected president had been doing land reform dealing with the type of racism we deal with in Guatemala, which is with Native Americans. He was giving land away that was owned by a US company, you can look this up in *Encyclopedia Britannica*. This is not something that's hidden or a conspiracy theory. Look it up. Any credible source will talk about this. The United States basically invaded Guatemala to restore the property of a US company under the guise of communism. They wanted to stop communism, but the reality is that they just wanted to give this company back their assets. This prompted a national, "I'm sorry," by at least two presidents of the United States, this particular incident. It's also connected in the sense that anti-communism rhetoric was used against people like Martin Luther King. He was investigated

for being a communist because much as folks from today's Black Lives Matter movement are being investigated as terrorists or communists, socialists, because it is a way of discrediting people. When you look at these things, they actually work together. You cannot talk about LGBTQ history in the United States without acknowledging that it was black transgender folks who actually started the movement. They were the first part of the riots. These things intersect in ways. You cannot talk about things like LGBTQ without talking about race, and you can't talk about race without talking about gender. You have to bring it out to a wider context in order to have a critical understanding of what's going on in this time. What's going on right now is not new. It's happened in the United States before, and it happens in cycles. Where we go from here is going to be really interesting. Will we lose the balance and fall into a dictatorship or something like it, or will we somehow return the pendulum to a place where there's democracy still alive, where this great social experiment goes on? Right now it's one of those times where we need to know. We're going to find out if this great experiment survives it or does not.

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.

JCC: 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. It really leads to a realization that while oppression affects different groups in different ways, the tools, the instruments we use to oppress people are always the same, whether it's economics, whether it's violence, whether it's dehumanization, whether it's isolation, whether it's so many different things, it's always the same. Whether it's in a situation of domestic violence when you isolate the woman to make her scared to be able to go see her parents or anybody else, or to tell her own story because she's going to get punished when she gets home, or to be scared every day that their children are going to be killed, or to not have enough money to make decisions about where to go, that same story can be said about African Americans in the United States today who are scared of their children being killed, who are scared of when they talk about racism being punished for it or fired. That same story can be told by LGBTQ persons who are told that they're not regular or normal human beings because they want to use a bathroom that's consistent with their identity, who are told that they are child predators because they want to exist as who they are and love who they want to love. Those are the same mechanisms even though the oppression and manifestation is different. It also is part of how even some white, rural communities are treated, being left out from decisions by the same methods of isolation and so forth. I just wish that those communities could come together and look at and analyze how those tools are being used upon them, because I think that there

would be a lot more bridges built. I truly believe that a white, rural farmer has more in common with a Latino immigrant migrant worker or an African American in the inner city than they do with the ultra rich. I just think that they're much closer, their perspectives more than anything else, and yet we create rhetoric that does not allow us to see that. I think that's what we have to take away. We have to create a wider visual so we can understand how these things are connected because all social evils foster in isolation.

BC: I'd love to hear a little more about what you've been doing the last three years, what you've been studying, your research that you hope to do and what your life is about these days.

JCC: One of the wonderful things that has happened to me is I've had, in this later part of my life – I turn 50 this weekend, on Saturday, which is a kind of big milestone for age. Most scholars go through their academics with very little life experience. They're very good at school, they go through a master's and then to a PhD, and they're done and out by 24 or 26 years old. I was somebody who sucked at scholarship for most of my life. To come back to scholarship, to look at these questions around race, around oppression, around how systems work, how do structural racism, structural homophobia, and all of these things work from a place of having 25 years of professional experience working with communities and organizations, it's a very different place. My questions are very different than many of my scholars. I really am interested in the pragmatics of it. Most people use either an inductive way of thinking in scholarship or a deductive way of thinking in their scholarship. I use an abductive way of thinking. Mine is all about how are we going to get the best answers we can right now in order to make a difference. I'm looking at these systems and saying, "How can we change these systems to be less racist? To be anti-racist? How do we have conversations with people who are in power?" Not the idea of the pedagogy of the oppressed or the idea of the pedagogy of the oppressor, but how do you find those alignments within that. How do you bring groups together who usually don't work together in ways of having conversations that actually enrich the wellbeing of our communities? How do we reach equity? How do we reach social justice in a way where it's not only performative, we're not only talking about it and using the right language, but we're actually living it? That's what I'm interested in. And it's hard. It's hard to be able to bridge the theoretical, conceptual stuff and the pragmatics of everyday change in institutions. But my goodness, I am so lucky right now to be able to play with that. At this point, I'll be taking comprehensive examinations this fall and starting my dissertation, actually, I've already started my dissertation, or at least the proposal for my dissertation, but will continue doing it and will hopefully get to the point where that PhD degree gives me the ability to speak about these issues in a way that other people who have not been classically in my circles are able to explore and examine. To be able to be a good facilitator for those in areas of liminality and of those conversations in areas of liminality that have to happen if we're truly going to make a difference. I practice this in my daily life, not only in my academics and research and my work. As a consultant, I help bridge those difficult conversations around race, and I do that to earn enough money to continue doing my doctoral work. In my doctoral work, I'm researching and studying that. In my private life, one of the things that I'm really happy about is that I have a group of all guys, not that we don't love and respect women, but I think guys sometimes get left out of the work in some ways. They

don't do their own work. Women are so much more powerful and more direct than we are. What we do is, in my personal life, sit around, drink beer, read books together, and debate the great questions of life like religion, race, and so forth. It's a very diverse group of people. One is from Turkey, one is from Bangladesh. There's two white guys, one from a very Christian background, one who's an atheist. Two Latinos, one very Native American, one more born and raised. It kind of works like this for me: my research lets me think about the ideas and ponder the ideas. My daily work allows me to put it into practice. My friendships allow me to explore them in a way that brings out the dimension of humanity of every individual at the table. I'm very blessed to be where I'm at.

BC: Yeah, that sounds really exciting. You shifted to talk a little bit about the Midwest. Much of your family has now moved to Iowa?

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.

BC: You say you feel like that's a common story of immigration. Families congregating together in maybe unexpected places like Iowa.

JCC: It's true of all immigrants. Even when they're refugees who get moved to particular places, the refugee strategy is to spread them out, and you see congregations of people. For a while, Iowa was a place where a lot of refugees congregated. There's jobs here, some people would come to Iowa, Minneapolis, Minnesota it's like that where people come together, especially in these communities and other communities. People look for the place where they feel comfortable. 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: Do you mean that even just on the day to day level, interactions with people, that sort of Iowa-nice facade isn't as real as it was, or that it doesn't go as deep as it used to? What do you think has changed?

JCC: 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.

BC: There's been real examples of young people especially who have experienced that risk of physical violence.

JCC: Yeah. There is.

BC: It feels like a place that felt like fertile soil, felt like a comfortable place to put down roots, but that's changing.

JCC: I've got to call my wife. I've got four messages.

BC: Okay.

JCC: [phone call with wife]

BC: Are there other things that you wanted to talk about? I know you wanted to talk about the work you're doing, the work you hope to do.

JCC: Sure. The work that I'm doing right now, I do a lot of consulting. I work in school districts and universities and systems to try to reform or look at some of these issues of inclusion, equity, diversity, anti-racism, so on. That's how I pay the bills. My longer term focus is really to, after I finish my doctorate, go back and lead those organizations. Not as the diversity consultant or the diversity person, equity coordinator, partly because I don't feel you can really do substantial change by being just the person in charge of diversity. I want to lead the organization as an executive director or I want to lead the organization as a board member or as a high level

administrator. The reason being I don't believe as an additional thing works. I think it has to be really core and parcel for the work of the organization if it's actually going to – it has to be more than performative. It has to be built in. Because you know about diversity and cultural context doesn't mean you don't know about organizational function and everything else. A lot of people think it's one or the other, but the reality is if you – there's no way to be a good professional or a good administrator or a good executive if you don't understand how culture, how power, how these things work in your organization. That's one of the things that has led us to the place that we are. There's people who go into their field, and they know a lot about particular content, but they might not understand how that has an effect on the culture of the organization, how it plays out, how culture makes a difference. I'm really looking at that place between academia, where I can continue to expand, and look at, and grow with the research, and bringing that research into how you can actually use that in organizations. Again, how do you bridge that place between academia and social change, whether it's in a not-for-profit or university research center or working in a unit in a university that really works with students and families and communities. I'm really looking at that place of liminality, which keeps one foot in academia and one foot in the real world.

BC: Exciting.

JCC: We'll see if it happens.

BC: Well, thanks so much for taking the time to talk with me and share about your story of immigration and your work and your vision for the Midwest.

JCC: And thank you for inviting me. I think one of the things that's been hard about this whole pandemic is that we're so far apart physically and not seeing each other on a daily basis, so it's just an honor and a pleasure to be here and be together with you, and even though it's across the room, to be able to see you and see your face, your expressions, and hear your voice. It's an honor. Thank you.

BC: Thank you.