

Transcript – Rachel Cassidy, Faculty

Narrator: Rachel Cassidy

Interviewer: Mary Murphy, Nancy L. Buc '65 Pembroke Center Archivist

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Mary Murphy: Okay, welcome to all of our listeners out there in the world, whether it's today, which is June 16, 2020, or sometime in the future. We welcome all of our listeners to the Pembroke Center Oral History Project. Today, I'm interviewing another Brown affiliated person, who we are specifically interviewing right now to share their experiences, not only during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also during the subsequent national upheaval following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the civil unrest around racism and the fight for anti-racism across the country. And at this point, I will ask the person who's joining us today to introduce herself and we'll take it from there. So welcome.

Rachel Cassidy: Hi, thanks for having me. I'm Dr. Rachel Cassidy. I'm an associate professor in the School [1:00] of Public Health in the Department of Behavioral and Social Science. And so my work is related to addiction and specifically smoking in teens.

MM: Okay, great. So Rachel, you saw that the Pembroke Center had put out a call in the last few days. I don't know if you've heard you, I'm sure maybe you did hear about the fact that we were doing COVID interviews, but you specifically followed up to our more recent call around folks who have participated in demonstrations here in Providence. So just why don't we start our conversation by telling you know, what struck you about the call? Why did you step up to add your name to this collection? Add your interview to this collection.

RC: Yeah, you know, it's stuck out to me because I live right in downtown Providence, which has been the kind of center of a lot of the different demonstrations being so close to the State House and to Kennedy Plaza, I live on Union Street, and so I've been [2:00] doing – Sorry, there's construction going on. Apologize. So, yeah, so you know, I was kind of eyewitness to

kind of the upheaval that had gone on, on, on Monday, I believe it was June 1. Just glass breaking and things like that on my street. And so that really spurred me to want to be part of the, you know, positive demonstrations that were taking place. And so I really thought it would be important to share my story just to, just to show that there are a lot of, a lot of people that live here, you know, support the demonstrations and how peaceful they were for the vast majority of participants.

MM: Okay. So what I think, I want to back up a little bit, actually. So we have these oral histories that we've documented. The earliest recorded oral history we have is from the early 80s, with a graduate of 1911. So with these interviews that we're doing today, we really want to set the stage for our listeners to help them understand when they're listening and later, what this time was all about, like, what happened here. And I [3:00] know that's maybe a heavy lift to ask you to explain that to our listeners, but if you could just step back a little bit and why don't you share with me your – paint, paint our listeners a picture about the first time that you heard George Floyd's name.

RC: You know, that's a good question. I think the very first time that I realized that something different was going on was listening to the news probably at the end of, of May. George Floyd was, of course, killed Memorial Day weekend. And what was interesting to me was, I heard about it on the news. Unfortunately, this was right on the heels of another Black man who had been killed, Ahmaud Arbery, which had also gotten a lot of attention. So it's, there was a feeling of wow, things are really, these things just keep happening and there was a sort of feeling of [4:00] they're getting attention in the news, but is anything going to change? And then there, I started to hear about the protests in Minneapolis. And then there was a protest the following weekend, right outside my door. So I think that was the first time that I really realized, wow, even though we're in the middle of a pandemic, and we've been not able to, or encouraged to, you know, go out in large groups, that there's still, you know, this kind of head of steam of anger and, you know, the desire to peacefully show that this is not okay. And so I was kind of stunned to see when I walked outside of my door on Saturday, that Saturday of the first protest, that there were so many people outside. You know, such as contrast from having been in a deserted downtown for so many months during the pandemic. And I think that was the first time. And I

hear the protester saying, “Say his name. George Floyd.” And that was really the first time I think I realized, you know, obviously people are moved enough by this [5:00] particular killing that, you know, this is the sort of enough is enough moment. And what I thought struck me about that protest too was how peaceful it was. I almost, I don’t want to say I felt – I was just proud of Providence that we had this very large protest, but there was no you know, no rioting, no, nothing, you know, nothing bad. My family lives in another, in another state that hasn’t seen very much protests. So they were calling to make sure and I was like, “Just don’t worry, like, that doesn’t happen here. You know, that’s not you know, we, it was a very powerful peaceful demonstration.” And so, I kind of thought, not that that was it, but I was like, wow, that was a really big protest, especially for you know, a pandemic and you know, I was really proud of us for that.

MM: Can I, I want to slow you down about what, because I think this is actually really important documentation is actually what you saw. Did you, were you looking out a window did you go down stairs to the bottom level of your home? Did you put on a mask to watch the protests go by? [6:00] If you could just give us some color around what you were seeing that first day. Were there, what kinds of people were part of the demonstration?

RC: Sure. So again, just, just in case I wasn’t clear, this was the protest on May 30, which was not the one that I took part in. I took part in the one on June 6. So on May 30, I actually didn’t know it was going on until I saw it. I was going out and it was a very, I remember, I was very excited because it was the first time I was going out somewhere from the pandemic. So I, it was a friend’s birthday on May 30. And so, when I was driving with my partner out of our building, I was like, “Wow, look at all these people.” They were just streaming into Kennedy Plaza and yeah, all different sorts of people. A lot of, you know, just typical [citizens?] of downtown so like mostly white, like most Rhode Islanders are, and then a lot of Black people as well, and a lot of young people, which I thought was really nice, but a lot of older people just, you know, a really diverse, you know, cross section, which I thought was great. And a lot of, [7:00] you know, just signs that we would come to associate with the movement. A lot of Black Lives Matter. I saw a lot of Trans Lives Matter, which I thought was, just stuck out to me and I thought was cool and interesting that there was already that intersectionality in the protest that I think has

become more of a feature of the protests. And at that time people were just gathering because it was earlier, it was like noon. And so people were kind of walking from Federal Hill down and we drove past Kennedy Plaza and down towards the State House. So that was all I saw on the first day because I wasn't home again until that night, but by the time I was back home at 10pm, there was nobody around so that was kind of, at least from where I was, things had really, you know, everyone just dispersed peacefully and so it seemed like it had gone off, you know, peacefully and with no issues.

MM: So you take this all in this day, and you're thinking, okay, this is fascinating, and you're watching what's happening in the news, like all of us. And so then what suddenly [8:00] makes it more personal for you like where you're, where you're like, I'm going to actually step out. Like what was the catalyst? I know you did. You said I wanted to, so you say this a little bit, but like, where's that moment if you can describe in your home or wherever you were where, where you're like, I can't just like do like, I'm going to take a step.

RC: Yeah.

MM: Tell us about – And like, did you make a sigh and like what did you write on it? That kind of thing.

RC: Yeah. Well, I think, for myself, what happened was Monday night, so the protest happened on Saturday. I was feeling very happy that everything was, there was no you know, over reaction by the police. Nothing happened. You know, nothing scary, certainly it was just, you know, a protest, which was great. And then Monday night at 2:30 in the morning, I was woken up by the sound of tear gas canisters going off and glass breaking. And it was just kind of shocking, you know, to be asleep and then all of a sudden this is going on and I went into, my partner was still up [9:00] and he was like, "Oh, yeah, there, you know, there's something going on at the mall. And he's like, people have lit, lit, you know, a cop car fire." He was like watching live feeds of what's going on. And we could hear people kind of moving from over by the mall towards the downtown area at 2:30, which was later in the night. So I was up until about 4:30. And hear a lot of glass breaking, a lot of running, you know, police chasing people. And I actually heard down

on our building, on the street, I heard two, sounded like two men talking and they were throwing, breaking the glass in the lobby next door. And I heard another protester run by and say, “How is this helping? How is this helping us?” And like I just, they didn’t really say anything. And I just, that just really stuck out to me that like, you have these people kind of just taking the opportunity to just do whatever and break stuff and you know, understandably, everyone is angry. But I thought it was really a microcosm of the moment [10:00] for another protester to come by and be like, is this helpful? Is this helpful to the movement right now? And just the whole thing really shifted because like I said, after the first Saturday, I was like, oh, that doesn’t happen here. Like everything was fine. And I was really shaken up when I looked around the next day. You know, all the glass was broken on Westminster Street. And it just shook me because I knew that that was not representative of how, like that wasn’t going to make downtown, like, not support Black Lives Matter. And I felt like there was a lot of people that I saw on social media that aren’t from downtown, that are from the suburbs, being like, I don’t know just characterizing it as like, “See? These protesters are out of control,” or something and it really made me upset because there was barely any coverage of this giant peaceful rally that, on the Saturday before. There was a smaller group of, and they’re mostly just young boys and I mean, I live downtown, sometimes people, we got a brick through our car window [11:00] just on a random Monday. Sometimes people just do dumb stuff. And it just annoyed me. It more than annoyed me, it really hurt me that my neighborhood was being characterized as something you know, like that we were just going to let this you know, one night of, you know, broken glass be like, well now we don’t support Black Lives Matter. No, that’s not, that’s not at all what’s happening and I was really heartened to see because the next day as plywood was put up over the store windows there were all these Black Lives Matter murals that were put up. Yeah, and just redoubled our, you know, commitment to the, to the movement and I think, and that was the next day I was like, no, I want, I want, it’s very important to me now that we go and support, you know, stand up with all of the other peaceful protesters who are the vast majority of people in this movement who no matter what happens to property that’s replaceable, that we all still support this movement and you know, that that’s what’s important to us and to our neighborhood, even though we’ve been you know, had some you know, this [12:00] civil unrest has affected, you know, things in our neighborhood that that doesn’t mean that, you know, we now for some reason don’t support Black Lives. I want people to say that about you know, to say that about our neighborhood. And I wanted, you know,

to make sure I was adding my voice to the protest. And so that was really what made it clear to me that I, you know, is imperative that I stand up for Black Lives Matter.

MM: So I want to just add for our listeners down the line, Providence is of course, one of the central features of our cities is the arts. There's a huge artist community here and so as windows were broken and things did happen, then artists did step in and almost overnight, there's a number, maybe half a dozen or a dozen, murals that have popped up along Westminster Street and Washington Street as well. I saw a few there. Large sized murals by Black artists. I saw an article, a woman Black artist, very cool, and she did one and then others popped up but I do think it's kind of [13:00] interesting to note that, that that did happen.

So, and so then you decide okay, so I'm going to join if there's another demonstration, I want to take part. Did you bring a sign? Did you bring a mask? Tell us about preparing and what did you do?

RC: Yeah, I, so I didn't bring a sign but I did bring, we all, me and my partner both wore black in solidarity that was sort of the idea was to wear all black in support of all Black Lives Matter. So we did wear black. We didn't make a sign, but we did wear masks, and I honestly thought it would be much more like the previous Saturday. So I didn't think there would be all that many, there would be, I thought there'd be a lot of people. But I was absolutely stunned by the number of people there were. As soon as I walked outside, I live on Union Street between Westminster and Washington, and as soon as I walked out onto Washington, just people streaming, streaming down the streets. I mean, [14:00] it was, you know, the only other comparable things have been like Pride and PVD Fest, you know, for something that was a little bit, it wasn't impromptu, but I think just for how, I was just so heartened to see how many people there were, it was absolutely shocking. And then everybody went towards Kennedy Plaza and then everybody just streamed all the way down towards the statehouse.

There was, like I said before, so many different types of people. A lot of white people, which made me feel good that there was a lot of us trying to be allies. Of course, a lot of the African American community, I saw a lot of people from downtown that I know from the downtown community, and I saw a lot of young people. This particular rally was organized by a youth organization, which I thought was really cool and important to be able to highlight those

youth voices because this is their world that we're, they're making and it's you know, important for them to have a say and you know, how all these protests go. And I felt like it was just [15:00] so moving. I was surprised at how moved I was. I've participated in protests before, or demonstrations, particularly the March for Science was, and the Women's March. But, and those were meaningful to me, but this day, it was not only the number of people but it was so, so moving to me how peaceful everyone was, everyone was wearing a mask. I don't think I saw anyone not wearing a mask. And that to me, just that commitment to public health I thought was really, as a public health researcher, was really cool. Just that, you know, we can all be here and be respectful.

Everyone was being really nice. Like someone bumped into you it was just like, "Oh, sorry." Like, I don't know, it was just a very peaceful vibe for how angry you know that, it's an angry, like, it's a bad thing that started these protests. It's not you know, it's there's understandable anger, but the vibe of the protest was very positive. And, you know, there was a lot of chanting, "Say his name. George Floyd." [16:00] "Say her name. Breonna Taylor." It was Breonna Taylor's birthday. So there was a lot of that. There was a lot of, you know, "No justice, no peace." And then we went to the State House, we all took a knee a number of times as different speakers, you know, went through. It was kind of hard to hear, to be honest, so I couldn't always hear exactly what they were saying. But there were, you know, the I know, there was a one of the young people that organized the group spoke for quite a while and that was really inspiring.

And it was, I, I choked up a number of times, just because the, the, you know, focus on obviously the lives that had been lost and all the lies that have been lost in the past and just how, I was kind of surprised at how, how moved I was. I'm not big on public displays of emotion, I guess. And then so I was, yeah, it was, it was almost hard sometimes to, to even say George Floyd, you know, "Say his name. George Floy." "Say her name. Breonna Taylor." Just to think about the impact of the lives lost and you know, that, that [17:00] is where the focus should be. And it's you either can be really sad, or you can be angry. And you know, sometimes people choose sadness and sometimes people choose anger and there's nothing wrong with being really mad about what's going on. This can't keep going on.

And I was very, that was the first time I heard of the saying, defund the, defend the police, which was something, a topic that hadn't really come up and, you know, I mean, that

made me want to learn more about it. And so I think it was a good platform to be able to show new, new policy, policy ideas, and that's what I, you know, kind of my interest is, so this is a policy, this is a real policy, this is real change that we can make. I think that's something that has been a struggle for people who are action oriented when these protests happen is like what are, what can we, what's a goal, what's something that we can do moving forward? And so that was really exciting to me that there's a policy idea, there's things that we can actually work towards, in a practical way that hopefully can make these types of things less you know, less than in the future. [18:00]

And yeah, everyone was really, really respectful. And the National Guard was out so that was kind of crazy. I've never seen like a Humvee before in real life and so that was interesting just the contrast with the super peaceful protesters and you know, I don't know Humvees and assault rifles and stuff like that and you know, remembering the tear gas canisters and all this stuff that I'd heard a couple nights before and just hoping against hope that nothing would get out of hand and that you know, nothing bad would happen. But, so we all went back. I think the protest started at like 4:30 and so it kind of dispersed by seven and Providence had had a curfew I think at nine for that night. And we all, we kind of watched and waited a little bit nervously that night. We were nervous that one of the protesters would get hurt by the police. So, I know when we were inside and respected the you know, the curfew and stuff and but I, I was like really worried, but luckily everything was fine. [19:00] We watched a lot of live feeds on, on Twitter, there was a lot of like, kind of independent journalists who were covering what was going on. And there were people who did stay at the State House past the curfew. But I was really heartened to see that the National Guard, you know, didn't react violently and that no, nobody was harmed, and there were no problems. So that was like a big sigh of relief that nobody's, none of those assault rifles were used and nobody was like, hurt by a Humvee. So like, that was really heartening to see. But that was definitely a nervous night of like, I hope that everything is smooth. And it was so I was really heartened to see that. Yeah, and just the whole thing was so positive. So.

MM: I have a few questions that what you're sharing is making me think about. I've been wondering a lot about the pandemic and allyship and the effect of the pandemic on allyship and speaking to a public health [20:00] scholar, researcher, what do you think? Do you think that the

COVID-19 pandemic has actually done something to touch white people or for to help folks equate racism with disease? With, that this is a pandemic that's happening, that's been happening in our country. Have you thought about that at all? The effect of the pandemic on motivating people to step up in allyship?

RC: You know, that's a great question. And I think, I think, I think a lot, a lot of people are wondering, you know, why, why now? Oh, you know, what, why, you know, unfortunately, there's been unarmed Black men being killed by the police for many, many, many, many years now and what why was this the tipping point? And I, I'm not sure. I'm not sure about, I mean, I think partially, you know, it's just a practical thing that in the pandemic, [21:00] the pan- the Coronavirus has just been overwhelming the news and every time we go in, you know, it's just the corona you know, and that's important, you know, whatever, but it's all kind of Coronavirus, Coronavirus, Coronavirus. And then when you have the video so, and I think as I mentioned before the Ahmaud Arbery slaying happened right before this and but then with George Floyd –

MM: [inaudible]

RC: I'm sorry?

MM: Can you describe just a little bit of that for our listeners about, about that piece of the story?

RC: Oh, so right before George Ford was killed, Ahmaud Arbery was killed and it was different in the sense that it was civilians who killed him. He was just running in his own neighborhood and he looked whatever. I guess he just looked suspicious. And these two white men chased him down and murdered him basically. Which struck a chord with me in particular because I lived in Florida at the time of the Trayvon Martin killing, which was this very similar story where a neighborhood, "Neighborhood Watchmen" killed [22:00] an unarmed Black man – really young, like a teenager. And so that was really stayed with me and I, and so the similarities really stuck out to me when I heard that story of like, this is these are just vigilante, people who think of themselves as vigilantes. So I was kind of primed, I guess maybe the whole nation was primed to be already like this can't keep happening. And then the George Floyd story I think, not only was

it I don't want to say it was a distraction from the cCoronavirus, because it sounds like it was something positive when obviously it wasn't, but just in the sense of the information that we're getting, it was a different kind of story. So I think people were kind of more primed to hear something new that wasn't the Coronavirus. And then the George Ford story. I mean, the video is so, so awful, and so clear. There's no, there's no lack of clarity on what's going on in that video. And so, but I'm not sure you know, to be really honest, I don't exactly know. I don't exactly know why this was, was the – [23:00] Or, you know, and I think there's cynics who would say, well, it's just everyone's bored. And you know, they want to go outside and they want to protest. At least that's what I hear on, like Fox News, which I think is not the case. I don't, I think people are, would, you think that people would be more, less, less likely to protest because we all are, you know, aware of the issues of being in large groups right now. And I'm not sure why this was the moment when, especially as you mentioned, you know, white Americans kind of started to realize that, you know, we are part of the problem, and we need to continue to, we need to start to step up in a more serious way. And I'm not sure why. But I think it's a really interesting question. I don't know. I really don't know. But I think it's something that – it feels different. It feels it feels very different. It feels like this is a new moment where we're, we as, as white people can't say, "Oh, that's really, that's too bad what's happening in your community." That we realized that it, these are our communities, they're everybody's community and we all of us have to take a stance. [24:00] I'm not sure, I'm really not sure why this moment.

MM: I wonder if it's about just, I've been thinking about it too and I wonder if it's about maybe a piece of it COVID-19 is, was and is scary and the idea of getting sick, you feel like a palpable fear. And I'm wondering if people some white folks are like, wow, like this is the fear that another part of our country feels always. Like, "Oh, is it this kind of a fear that like a visceral, physical fear?" And then to think, oh, my God, like, we are, like white people are like, we are the disease, like we are the disease, like we are causing this great fear and pain and our other community members lives and like that is really I think, maybe sort of an awakening. I don't know. That's just a brainstorm I've had.

And then the other question, I want to ask you [25:00] is about the difference having attended the Women's March with this demonstration where you saw the National Guard. I also

attended the Women's March. So I want to get your take on the difference in behavior between police that you maybe saw at the Women's March, or law enforcement, whatever. And then the law enforcement that was there during the demonstration you attended here in Providence?

RC: Oh, yeah, night and day. And I actually I didn't attend the Women's March here in Providence, but I attended the March for Science, which was like, very small and, yeah, there was like one cop and he was like, "Hi, like, have a nice time." You know, like, it was totally like, no, like, he was like, "Oh, cool, science." Like, you know, he was totally different. It was so like, night and day, but it also you know, and I think that was part of it's weird though, because while the cops are like, "Yeah, do whatever," like they're, you know, it's a bunch of dorks like, you know, like, no one can care. And then also, it [26:00] very, at the March for Science, like it wasn't effective. Like, I remember leaving, and I had my sign. I had bought, like, I don't know, I felt very like, I remember looking at my partner and be like, I don't know why we just did that, but it felt good. Like, it felt much more like, I don't know why we did that. Whereas, like, and they were, I mean, far fewer people. I mean, there were probably like, 75 people. I mean, it was very small. So it was like nothing. So this was like, wow, this is a, obviously we're getting somewhere because if the National Guard are called out, like people are paying attention, you know, the, you know, the Governor's paying attention. So, yeah, and the cops and I would say, I do have to say like, you know, it must be hard. Like, I mean, like, seeing it from the National Guard's perspective, obviously, you know, they're, especially the National Guard. I mean, they're civilians most the time, you know, they're just people living their lives and they're, you know, called up for these things and they seemed pretty [27:00] relaxed, and you know, they're getting, you know, not yelled at, but you know, the protesters are kind of, you know, saying things to them and stuff like that. And you know, you kind of have to just, as the National Guard, you're trained to just kind of take it and just, you know, you're not saying anything back or you should, you know, ideally just kind of be standing there and taking it. And I can imagine that would be hard after several hours of just kind of getting, like people in your face, but they're trained to, you know, that's their job to kind of just be there to protect people. And but yeah, it was, I wouldn't say they were wary, like, I think that they were pretty, I don't want to say relaxed. I don't know that how relaxed someone with an assault rifle is like relaxed, but they were not, they didn't seem hostile, which was nice. They seemed pretty, pretty calm. And like I

said, I was worried that, that the, after the curfew that they would kind of be, you know, on their guard, but they, they weren't and that was a big contrast from a friend who attended the protests in Brooklyn and said that there was palpable [28:00] hostility from the cops at pretty much every point. Whereas I didn't feel that, but I'm a white person, and I don't, you know, ever feel that so I didn't, but I didn't feel you know, at least not from my perspective, I didn't feel like they were particularly hostile. But just the idea that they're standing there next to a military grade vehicle with an assault rifle is a very different experience from the March for Science where they're actively waving at us and, you know, chatting with us. There was none of that. It was just sort of like we're here, we're going to stand behind these barricades, and we're going to let you go pass basically. I don't know.

MM: Yeah, that was, I attended the Women's March in Boston and the cops were like, so fabulous. They were like dancing with families and like hugging women and high fiving. And then it's like, Can you imagine if the cops were like hugging protesters, as they demonstrated and like high fiving and the people with Black Lives Matter signs? Like, they could.

RC: Yeah. Exactly. I know. And I don't know what it was like at the first protest. But yeah, it was, it was interesting. And I also thought it was interesting that, you know, [29:00] they had to close down the road obviously so we can all go past on that Saturday and there were people honking. And but they were pleasant honkers which in Rhode Island usually it's like angry, angry honking. So I thought that was nice. And there was more, there's a lot of you know, "Yay," even though they're kind of stuck at a red light for two hours or however long. There's a lot of, you know, pleasant kind of, seems like a lot of community support. But yeah, it was really nice. And there was another smaller march the next couple days, I saw a lot more people. It seems like it's really like, not letting up in terms of, you know, the number of people who are still involved in all the marches that are still being planned. So that's different, too, whereas I felt like this March for Science and even to a certain extent with the Women's March, you know, the later years weren't as you know, kind of didn't keep up the same intensity, I guess. And so it seems like this is more at a higher intensity and, you know, they're kind of continuing to put, you know, to have pressure building and momentum.

MM: Okay, well, I think [30:00] as we run up on time here, I, what do you want people to remember about this time? If someone's studying this, you know, 50 years from now, this, this time in our lives in our country. Like what do you hope people don't miss? What do you hope that people don't forget to look at?

RC: I think I hope that people recognize that the vast majority of people who protested during this time, were peaceful, and also, the vast majority of people who protested were not directly affected by what happened in Minneapolis. You know, even with the Women's March and with the March for Science, it was a bunch of women and a bunch of scientists. Whereas this, you know, was not mostly seeing Black Americans. It was not mostly Black Rhode Islanders. It was mostly white people just reflected, you know, the demographics of Rhode Island, which is majority white. And I think it's important for us to know that this is one of the very first times where you know, [31:00] this is a societal movement. It's not about just one particular class of people that's affected. That we all agree that this is an injustice that needs to be addressed. And I hope that people recognize that, that this was a broad, at least in Rhode Island, it was a broad swath, you know, a real cross section of the state agreed that this is an injustice that needs to be addressed.

MM: Okay, well, I just thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. And this interview now becomes part of the Pembroke Center Oral History Project, which will be made available for research to people for many years to come. So I'm going to stop the recording now, but I want to thank you officially for participating today.

RC: Thank you so much.

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