

Transcription

All right. Hello and good morning. It is currently 9.24 a.m. CST in Garland, Texas, and also in Denton, Texas. My name is Basmarsha, and today I am here on a Zoom call with Dr. Deborah Armentar, a professor at the University of North Texas and an activist associated with the Denton chapter of Jewish Voice for Peace. I'm speaking with Dr. Armentar today as part of the Milpa Agricultural Placemaking Project's efforts to collect food and agricultural-related oral histories from North Texas. Deb, thank you for being here. Welcome. My pleasure. Well, let's start at the beginning. When and where were you born? I was born in 1973 in Copenhagen, Denmark. What was that like? I don't remember. I don't remember. But I was born there because my father, who is an engineering professor, he was on a sabbatical there. And so my mom was pregnant when they went there. So they knew I would be born there. I don't remember what that was like, but I hear it was great. And then, you know, we moved, you know, back to the U.S. to live in Massachusetts for a little while. Then we moved to the U.K., lived there. Also for another sabbatical. You know, this is when I'm like two years. So I don't have many memories of that. And then we moved to Providence, Rhode Island. And that's where I grew up and where most of my memories start. Then after high school, I went to college at Brandeis University. I majored in English and women's studies. Then I went to graduate school at Rice University in Houston in literature, English literature. And then after that, I got this job straight out of graduate school at University of North Texas. And so, you know, I ended up kind of becoming a Texan with my move to Rice in 1995. And I have been here in Denton at UNT since 2002. My two children were both born in Denton. Now they're both in college in the Northeast. But I'm still here in Texas. That's beautiful. Beautiful. I should also say, and I, you know, I've been, I'm an activist on a number of different issues. And I also served two terms on Denton city council. All right. I'm going to pick pieces of that to kind of like zoom into. Let's start with your childhood. What was that like? Oh, I had a happy childhood. I was a, a very bookish kid and a very artsy kid and very shy, but I was happy. I loved to draw. I loved to read and be read to. I had a very active imagination. I was a real daydreamer. My mom used to have to... talk to my teachers in advance in elementary school and say, Debbie, which is how I went by the time, you know, Debbie will look like she's not paying attention, but she is. Anyway. Yeah. You know, I had a happy childhood. I was a weird kid, but a happy kid. Are you an old child? No, no, I have a brother. So I have one sibling who's a brother. He's younger than me. He is about two years younger than me. And he's actually, he's also an academic. He's an endowed professor of biophysics at Harvard. which I say is like the UNT of the Northeast. Oh, you froze. Oh, am I back? Yes, you're back, you're back. Oh, okay, okay. So, and we

are, yeah, he and I are very close. And although I don't get to see him as much as I like, he actually, he married, ended up marrying my childhood best friend, which was kind of neat. So now she's my sister-in-law, but yeah, they live in Massachusetts. That's adorable. Yeah. Well, okay. So tell me more about that. Kind of like this one home you had in Massachusetts and now you're over here. What was that like, this transition? Oh, to Texas? It was from Rhode Island to, or I guess from, yeah, because I was at Brandeis, which is in Massachusetts. Went from there to here. You know, the biggest kind of culture shock for me was, well, I guess... the two biggest probably were that when I first moved to from, you know, the, uh, Rhode Island and Massachusetts to Houston was, um, that how, how friendly people were, um, which I was very suspicious of at first. Uh, and then I just grew to I just grew to realize, oh, that's just the culture. People here will say hello to you. It doesn't mean that they're being predatory in any way necessarily. Another thing was just adapting to both how big Texas is and even just how big Houston is and just the lack of public transportation and walkability you know i was used to just kind of walking everywhere and taking buses or um the or you know in massachusetts you know taking the train uh and so i was suddenly in a place where yeah that was you know where i would try to walk places even places that were relatively close and there wouldn't be sidewalks You know, for me to walk on, I feel like I was walking on a highway and people driving by would look at me weird. You know, like, what's her deal? She's walking. So, yeah. But, you know, other than that, I mean, I really like graduate school. And being a graduate student is such a weird experience that you never really get to, at least in my experience, feel what it's like to really live in the place you're living in. because you're living there as a graduate student. Living in Denton, Denton actually reminds me in a number of ways of the college town I grew up in in Providence, Rhode Island. It's a college town. There's a lot of arts and music and culture here. Yeah. So, you know, politically, you know, Texas, you know, and even Denton is more, much more right. Well, Texas is completely, you know, far right. And, you know, but Denton is kind of center left. On average, you know, Island I had never really met a Republican really before I moved to Texas, really before I moved to Denton, because I really didn't meet any in graduate school either. So, yeah. In Houston, I'm surprised. Well, but that's because of, I should say, that's because of how... Um, isolated. I was, I made myself as a graduate student, you know, uh, I stayed on campus and studied and did my work. Um, and then when I would go out, we would go to, you know, um, you know, queer places, you know, concerts, you know, people where not places were not where, um, you know, kind of right wing people tend to hang out. I mean, I'm sure I like all the time encountered people in grocery stores and, you know, whatnot. But as far as having conversations. Fascinating. I'm going to keep on with the theme of this like politics. So I'm going to ask you about your political activities. I know that you served with, uh, Denton city council. What was that like? Um, it was the best of times and the worst of times. I loved, I served for two terms. Um, uh,

I loved, um, serving the public. I loved doing every day what I wanted, uh, my local representatives, what I've always wanted my local representatives to do and say for me. So it was really great to do that and to get the feedback from people saying, thank you for saying this. Thank you for speaking out on this. Thank you for being real. You know, there was a lot of trauma that, uh, I went through, but I would still do it all over again. Um, because it involved, you know, when there were situations happening, I mean, basically my, my approach to council was, so I, and I should say I was in an at large position, meaning citywide. So I didn't represent any one district. I represented the whole city. Um, so if any, anyone, uh, you know, person or group or community came to me with an issue, uh, you know, that's how I got my directives. Um, and, you know, I would just take it from there. Um, but also, you know, when I saw, um, that there were, um, you know, major gaps in government or, um, and even especially harms being, actual harms being done by local government that I would try to put a stop to. I just ended up really encountering the dark side of just government in general. You know, when I went into it, I was not naive and I did not think that, you know, we have a perfect democracy and everything is perfect. But, you know, the more I saw of you know, the lack of transparency, the lack of understanding what democracy is, you know, both on council and in city administration, and the total mismanagement of the budget of tax dollars to meet public needs, like housing, food, health, just public health and public safety. And by public safety, I mean just people being safe. I don't use that as a kind of code word for police because I feel very strongly that police don't make us safe. And I see all this money going to police, to gas plants, to private businesses, corporations from out of town, while the people I'm serving are struggling to keep their electricity on. When we have a public electric company, seeing all of the ridiculous amount of money that our parks department was spending, that our kind of underfunded parks department was spending on pesticides and biosolids that harm our environment using toxic pesticides in parks where kids play, providing biosolids to a community garden where food is grown that is provided to various charities that feed poor people. I just encountered all of this. I encountered two of the biggest traumas and fights for me. The two were when Denton City Police murdered Darius Tarver, who was 23 years old, um, UNT student, uh, who was having a mental health crisis. Um, and, uh, his, uh, uh, roommates called 911 for help. And they sent the police who saw him as a threat. They came in seeing him as a threat, even though he had not heard it hurt anybody. Um, and they tased and shot him to death. Um, and my, uh, uh, just struggle to fight for transparency and justice and not when everybody else on council and the entire administration, um, was either being silent on it or just actively defending the police. Um, and I was very outspoken, active against it. Um, and when, um, You know, the other biggest kind of trauma and fight for me on city council was the community of Green Tree, which was a, Green Tree Estates, which was and still is a really lovely mobile home community in

Denton. over by, uh, Pecan Creek, um, elementary school where all the kids in this community went to school. Um, uh, and, uh, their, you know, council was notified at one point that their, um, uh, that the owner of the land, uh, that these mobile homes were on, uh, who controlled the well that provided all of their, um, drinking water and also, you know, uh, shower water, potable and non potable water, um, was turning off their water, shutting off their water. Um, so they were not this, this mobile home community, like some, but not all other mobile home communities in Denton are not hooked up to the city water, uh, but to private well water. Um, and, uh, this is a community that was, um, you know, primarily, uh, um, Mexican American community primarily, but not exclusively. Um, and, uh, you know, families, kids, it was a very close-knit community. And the city just treated them like, when the city came in there to, you know, to like notify the, or to respond really to what was happening because You know, the residents had already heard that this water was going to be shut off, right? And then kind of the city found out, you know, and the city, I found out after the fact that city staff had come into this community and handed out flyers that said, you know, are you experiencing homelessness in Denton? Here's what to do. So there was just this assumption that these people are all going to be homeless now and this community is done. And that was enraging to me. And so I went there and I got to know the amazing families who lived there, did not want to move. They wanted water. They also wanted proper trash collection, which I found out that they did not have. Um, and you know, because I consider just access to water, a basic public need. This was something that I felt very strongly. It was the city's responsibility to provide to this community. Um, and that was a real fight. Uh, and, um, you know, I, I stayed overnight with that community the night that their water got turned off. Um, And I alerted some activists in the community. And we had to fight just to get this community seen as human, to get the city to see their homes as homes and not trash. We had to fight to get city council meetings to have Spanish language interpreters so that the adults in these communities who couldn't speak English, who were not, I mean, everyone had some English, but, you know, who were not fluent in English could understand what was being said about them. You know, so, you know, these were, you know, I'm so glad I was there, you know, in both of those cases to fight and represent um uh but i also saw the extreme harm that local government can do to people um you know uh also in the case of you know i was very active on um also before i got on council as well uh the rights of people experiencing homelessness in Denton. And that was where I encountered also a lot of dehumanization, refusal to meet just the most basic needs, let alone eradicating homelessness by providing housing. And so, you know, I got to know a lot of my homeless constituents who were, had never before been treated like they were even constituents, you know? Whereas like, if you live in Denton, you know, whether you live in the woods, you know, um, whether you're couch serving, whatever, um, if you live in your car, that doesn't matter to me. What property you own does not matter to

me. I represent you. Um, and, uh, so, you know, um, yeah, you're just, uh, uh, like I said, the best of times and the worst of times, you know, I was so glad to be there. So honored to represent, um, but so frustrated and angry. Uh, it, you know, it really, um, you know, being on council, like far from, um, making me turning me into a politician and making me, you know, sell out or whatever, it really radicalized me and made me something of an anarchist. Um, you know, um, you know, when I saw, you know, not only how our local government is not helping, but it's actively harming people, um, who we should be helping the most and how we are helping people who don't need help, you know, like, uh, you know, corporations from out of town, for instance. Like, you know, when it comes to our electric company, you know, and this is still the case. And before I was on council, I was on the public utility board because I was very, you know, and distribution and access from a human rights point of view, you know, and an environmental point of view. And, you know, the fact that our public utility, which is not a for-profit electric company, but it's just there to provide electricity to the public to keep people's power on. was and still is providing massive discounts, bulk discounts on power to the biggest users, like the Walmarts and the Targets, also UNT, and charging more for the smallest users, most of all to the smallest and poorest users of electricity. So what they would do, you know, and still do is if people had a bad credit rating, which people, you know, generally have like just for being poor, um, uh, then they would, you know, charge you extra on top of the usual already inflated rate. I say, you know, inflated compared to what the big corporations or, you know, the universities were getting. Um, And as a result, people would end up not being able to pay and getting their power shut off, and then having to pay to get it turned back on. And so people's lives were at risk. I spent so much time, and even before I got onto council, spent time. And I still do spend time. just on an individual basis, you know, finding out about people whose power is getting turned off and then asking, okay, is there anyone in your household who has disabilities? Yeah. And very often there is yes. You know, anyone who is a senior, anyone who has, you know, health issues, um, you have children, you know, are there children in your household and then making the case, you know, to try to get the power turned on, um, to, um, or prevent it from being turned off. Uh, but, uh, you know, and, um, it is just, just an absolute nightmare, you know, to see that we could be all, all of the money and staff effort that was being spent to police, um, you know, poor and working class people, uh, uh, for, you know, not paying their bills and their bills, which are just drops in the bucket, you know, for the, our electric company, um, you know, while they're giving these big discounts to, um, you know, the biggest users, it's just so unethical. And also of course, environmentally irresponsible because we're basically, you know, incentivizing, um, waste, uh, Yeah. Um, just, uh, so that's just in a, not kind of just an overview on, um, you know, being on city council, uh, I could brag about my accomplishments and I have all here, all the great things I did. And we got, I got this past

and that past, but whenever somebody asks me or when I think about what was, um, but like being on city council, the first and really only thing that comes to mind and kind of all I want to talk about and share is how terrible our local government is and many local governments are in allocating resources to meet community's greatest public needs. I am conscious of the time, so there's a lot I want to unpack there, but I know that we do have some time to think about. Thank you for sharing, and I appreciate that you've made these connections between racial violence and access to food, access to water, access to basic utilities, and just the difficulties of living. I really like that you brought attention to that, and I'm glad you're still fighting. Well, thank you. Thank you. Okay. I want to ask about your work with the Jewish Voice for Peace's Denton chapter. Can you tell me more about that? Sure. Yeah. So first of all, it's actually the Dallas-Fort Worth area chapter. No problem. So we cover all of Dallas-Fort Worth, which includes, even though Denton's not in the name, it includes Denton, you know, and includes Frisco and includes Plano and includes So it's, but yeah, we are Jewish Voice for Peace, DFW. Yeah. So after, well, so I should always say, I should say I have always been, you know, for my adult life, very, you know, critical of the state of Israel and supportive Palestinian rights and very angry at Israel and Zionism, especially American Zionism for the way they equate my ancient faith tradition of Judaism with the political ideology of Zionism, which is a political ideology that is defined by settler colonialism, apartheid, and dehumanization of indigenous peoples. And so that has always been something very important to me. And I have always, you know, been a relatively well-informed person on this issue, signed petitions and whatnot. But I had never, you know, until October 7th, I had never really done, like, in-person activism on this issue. You know, I was always a... you know, I would, I would be there to sign something. If there was something to sign, I would stay informed and I would make posts on social media, you know, but that was kind of the extent of it. And so after October 7th, I, I decided, you know, I, you know, I can't, um, but I decided I have to be more active on this. I can't not be. And so I saw and loved what Jewish Voice for Peace groups were doing to protest the augmented assaults on Palestinians in Gaza, you know, as a response to the events of October 7th, um, the, um, escalation of the ongoing Nakba, the, you know, displacement, um, of, of the displacement and genocide of Palestinians. And, um, And so I was so admired what Jewish Voice for Peace groups were doing all over the country to stand up as Jews and put their bodies in the way of the US war machine to say, not in my name. and the work that they were doing to combat the lie that Judaism and Zionism are the same thing. You know, to combat the lie that Israel represents all Jews and that to criticize Israel is somehow anti-Semitism. You know, this lie was harming people and people's rights, not only in Israel, but all around the world. including in the United States, including in Texas, including in DFW area. Anyway, so I said, okay, I'm going to join the DFW Jewish Voice for, join the local Jewish Voice for Peace, say, how can I become involved? I'm

here. And then I found out that there was no DFW area Jewish Voice for Peace. And so I got together with some other anti-Zionist Jews who were having the exact same experience. And we said, okay, you know, we knew what we needed to do. We need to start, start the chapter. So we, you know, we did that immediately and immediately, you know, formed connections with, and close friendships and working relationships with the, you know, DFW area Palestinian youth movement with American Muslims for Palestine, um, with the Dallas anti-war committee. Uh, and so, you know, we did a lot of work, um, and continue to with these groups, not only having protests, um, uh, and acts of civil disobedience, you know, to try to shut down weapons manufacturers, et cetera, but also, you know, education events, press conferences. And, you know, we've also done, and, you know, something I've been especially active on myself is kind of doing, you know, is working with CARE, the Council on American Islamic Relations, on interfaith press conferences that they have had on the rights of Muslims and Palestinians and Arabs in the DFW area. and students' rights. And so I have, you know, been in a number of these, like, press conferences representing a Jewish perspective that is counter to, you know, for Jewish, representing Jewish words for peace, but as a result, countering the, you know, what is often presented as the Jewish perspective in the mainstream media, um, which is, you know, a Zionist representation, which is a misrepresentation of, of, of Judaism. Um, so, uh, anyway, yeah. So, uh, and, you know, I, um, I was, uh, arrested, um, and an action that we did, an act of civil disobedience. It was not just Jewish Voice for Peace, it was we and a number of other groups, but Palestinian Youth Movement, Dallas Anti-War Committee. But in Biden's first trip to Texas, no, I'm sorry, not his first trip to Texas, his first trip to Dallas, he flew into Dallas Um, and, uh, 13 of us, um, blocked, you know, stood and we put our bodies and we blocked the road from the airport. Um, and, um, and, uh, uh, we shut down traffic to the airport. Um, and yeah, uh, got arrested for that. Um, you know, a year later, you know, the, After going to court in Dallas every month, the charges had been dropped. We spent the night in jail and I would do it all over again. It was a small thing, but it was like, it was the first, you know, kind of major act of civil disobedience that made the news in the DFW area to show people, you know, that we refuse to normalize what's happening, you know? And yeah, and actually I am now serving as, you know, literally this afternoon, I'm going to go to Tarrant County. I am serving as an expert witness for the defense in a trial where in Tarrant County, where Somebody, an activist for Palestine had spray painted on a Christian evangelical Zionist church, had spray painted it on the outside of the church, fuck Israel. And so that's graffiti, which is a misdemeanor, but the state had seized on it, the county and the state, and amped up the charges from just a misdemeanor graffiti charge to hate crime charge, which carries with it a sentence of, if found guilty, one to 10 years in prison. Yeah, and the implication is, you know, hate crime against Israel equals anti-Semitism. So I'm, you know, one of the expert witnesses for the defense. And by the way, I

haven't told, you know, hardly anybody, but I'm telling you knowing that this won't be public until after this trial is done, right? So, yeah, so like, if you wouldn't mind just like, you know, not mentioning it to anyone until next week, you know, but, you know, it's so, and hopefully that will go well and the jury will see how absurd it is to call it a hate crime. I mean, literally, you know, hate crime legislation does not cover countries, you know, There's no such thing as a hate crime against the country of Israel. You can't, you know, everybody knows that in America, like, you know, the First Amendment allows you to say, fuck America, fuck the USA. And but saying, fuck Israel, they're claiming is a hate crime against Jews. I say, fuck Israel. I say and think it multiple times a day. at least I think it multiple times a day, and I say it multiple times a week. And I'm a very proud Jewish person. So it's just so absurd. So I just really feel an obligation to, as a Jewish person, speak out against this, because if I don't, then I'm responsible for what's happening. both the genocide in Gaza and the assault on human rights and the assault on free speech and activism for Palestine in the US. I know that like you have to leave soon, so. I will try to wrap up, but the good news is that you did hit most of my questions in some way or form without me asking, so yay. Is there anything that you want to add that we didn't get to touch on? You know, I mean, there are a few things that I'll just kind of mention. that you and I don't have time to go into in detail, but just that you might want to, I don't know, in interviewing other people or whatever, kind of follow up. And I'd be happy to, if you want suggestions on who to interview about this. We've got a real problem in Denton with food deserts, especially in communities of color. Um, and that's something that I was very active on and tried to act on and was really frustrated at the walls that I hit. Um, but have, I have seen what other cities can, can do, you know? Uh, so, um, also, um, something else that I'm involved in, uh, now is, um, mutual aid to provide food and supplies and advocacy and whatever is needed for people experiencing homelessness whose needs are not being met by the institutions that are in place that are supposed to be helping. and so you know that's just something else that's really important to me and you know if you would want to I would be happy to you know put you in touch with people who are on the yeah the front lines you know of providing food food and and water and basic needs in the form of mutual aid to people experiencing homelessness. And many of us, not myself, but many of us are people who have been homeless in Denton themselves. And that is so important. that, you know, any response to homelessness be approached not from a top-down perspective, but that people experiencing homelessness in Denton and people who have recently experienced homelessness in Denton be at the table in positions of power and decision-making because they're the experts, not the, you know, CEOs of the charities. I will definitely follow up with you and hopefully get in touch. Yeah. Oh, I'm sorry. One more thing I just thought of, and this is something that I'm actually not actively involved in, but very much support. I don't know if this is relevant to your project, you know, but food insecurity in at UNT, um,

you know, and the food pantries. Um, I know somebody, you might know him too. I think Sophia knows him. Um, uh, you know, Donald Cox, um, who he used to work for UNT at the, uh, multicultural center, um, But he is a recent UNT PhD recipient. So he is Dr. Donald Cox. But he can tell you from not just research, but actual firsthand experience, because he was at UNT at the time, how the first people to set up a food pantry at UNT were the Black Panthers. in the 70s. And so everything I've learned about that, you know, I've learned from him. And that's a really important part of the history. And it's important that people know that food pantries in Denton. Oh, hold on a second. Bye bye. That food pantries in Denton are not new and that they were not started by you know, uh, by white people or by administrators or caring faculty, you know, they were started by, uh, black students, um, who were feeding, uh, you know, not only, um, food, food insecure people at UNT, but also in the community. And, um, and, uh, Don Cox, Dr. Cox now, um, you know, tells a great story about, so don't take my word for this, but this is just to give you an idea of the kind of story you can tell. So, you know, you know, the seven 11, um, that's at, um, on, um, Oak and like Avenue C kind of. Yeah. So yeah, there's a seven 11 there. It's like near like, um, like next to Farrah's, which used to be Barry's and near, and, and, and it's next to the CVS on, you know, the CVS on Hickory. Like, yeah. So it's like the, and that, that CVS is on the corner of Hickory and Avenue C. And then right next to that, there's a gas station that belongs to the seven 11 and there's that seven 11. Anyway, that seven 11 has been there for a long time. And yeah, According to Dr. Cox, when the 70s, when the Black Panthers had the – I'm saying the 70s. Maybe it was late 60s, but I think early 70s, so don't take my word for it. But this is just an advertisement to go talk to Dr. Cox about this. He told me how – Black, student Black Panthers came into that 7-Eleven and just started taking food off the shelves. And they went up to the, you know, owners or managers of the 7-Eleven and they said, we are taking this food. You know, they didn't pay to pay for it. They said, we are taking this food to give to the community because you owe this to the community. You are profiting from this community and this community is going without food. And so you owe this and we're taking it and putting in our food pantry. And according to Dr. Cox, like, you know, they didn't do anything to stop them, you know, because like they had no argument, you know? So I just, I love that story so much. And I hope it's true. I just love that, that that is where our food pantries came from. And none of this top down, you know, like, oh, our poor little students. This was like real radical, you know, anti-capitalist, you know, activism. Oh, that's amazing. Yeah. Yeah. I will definitely be contacting you. Cool. Yeah. Thank you, Dr. Armentor. Oh, you're welcome. My pleasure. Great talking to you. Okay. I will stop recording here.