

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY STUDY ON WHITE PEOPLE

The Reminiscences of

Barbara Spencer

INCITE

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## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Barbara Spencer conducted by Interviewer Whitney Dow on September 24, 2017. This interview is part of the Study on White People.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Session #1 (Video)

Interviewee: Barbara Spencer

Location: Battle Creek, Michigan

Interviewer: Whitney Dow

Date: September 24, 2017

Q: So, first of all, can you tell me your name, where you're from, what you do, and a little bit about yourself?

Spencer: [16:37:43] Sure. So, my name is Barb [Barbara] Spencer. I was born in Midland, Michigan, but grew up mostly in Muskegon. We moved to Muskegon when I was in third grade—North Muskegon, and then I lived there and graduated from that high school. I moved around quite a bit the last few years, but I've worked in education for over twenty. I was a high school teacher for twenty years. Then I was a literacy coach for a couple years, so, working with other teachers at Benton Harbor, now I work for Calhoun Intimidate School District, again, kind of as a coach-consultant working to help schools improve educational outcomes for kids, and teachers to improve their craft. That kind of thing.

Q: And what was the motivation for you to get involved in this project?

Spencer: [16:38:37] Well, when I got your emails, I was trying to remember where I was when I heard about it. I think it was probably at, well I'm a member of SURJ, Showing Up for Racial Justice, and I thought it would really be a good opportunity to just do a little more of my own work and get a chance to reflect about the experience of whiteness, and yeah. Just a chance to

talk about the issues, because we don't talk about race and whiteness as a race, I don't think, enough. I don't have a lot of opportunities to talk about it.

Q: When you say you don't talk about it enough, why do you think that we should talk about it more?

Spencer: [16:39:20] Well, I think that we need to talk about race because this country was founded on a contradiction. We have all this rhetoric about liberty, justice for all, I mean, we're watching today what's going on in the NFL as a response to Donald Trump's comments, and I feel like until we talk about the fact that when our founders didn't—when they said that, they didn't mean all, and that from the beginning, this country's been built on the backs of people of color, and slavery has been here as long as we've been here. And until we start talking about it, we're not going to get any clarity around that, and this is going to continue. This being all the polarizing of our country and the dialogue in the country.

Q: So, can you talk a little more about your background? Where you grew up, what the neighborhood was like where you grew up, your family, the neighborhood, was it mixed, was it homogenous?

Spencer: [16:42:09] Yes. I grew up, as I mentioned, really what I think about was my childhood started in third grade, which was when my family moved to North Muskegon. My dad was a working professional. North Muskegon was a great place to grow up. I think we had, in terms of race, maybe my junior year we opened up to school of choice, and so at that point we had maybe

three black kids in our school, and that was it. It was all white. There were some—I shouldn't say all white. There were some Asian-American kids that I grew up with that were adopted. There was a family from the Philippines also that—like, I graduated with their son. Everybody, there was no talk about race or anything like that. I say it was a great place to grow up because I remember there was water everywhere: we had Bear Lake, we had Muskegon Lake, we had Lake Michigan. We were safe; I rode my bike everywhere as a kid. So, in that sense.

But I also remember from a really young age having questions that my classmates didn't necessarily have. I was a big reader, so even starting late elementary I read a lot of biographies—a lot of slave biographies—and I started to realize there was a difference, but there was really no one to talk to about that difference, so I just kind of let it go.

Q: And so, obviously you started thinking about that, but did you start thinking about your own race at that point, and what context?

Spencer: [16:44:01] No, not at all. I don't think I started thinking about—I was very much thinking about the injustices in the world, but I didn't think about my own race, I really don't think, until I was a teacher, and maybe even the second half of my teaching career. I went and taught at a wonderful place called Covert [phonetic] and it was high poverty—over 90 percent free and reduced lunch, and the kids were mostly either Mexican, their families had come undocumented from Mexico, or we got a lot of kids who were Mexican through Chicago. They came to Chicago first and then went to Covert. And then, also, black, so, it was about a mix; probably when I started there, probably less than 30 percent Hispanic, but then it grew.

I remember them saying things like, “Oh, what kind of food do white people eat?” and things like that. And the thing about Covert was we could talk about race. People were open about it. There wasn’t a lot of conflict around it all the time, so at least in my classroom we would talk openly about it and tease each other about it, so they were saying, “Oh, what do white people eat? Tuna casserole?” You know? And I started thinking about it, and then they said, “Well, what country are your parents from?” And I said, “Well, we were just born here.” But my dad’s parents had come from Germany, but I don’t think of myself as German-American. And so, there was not a lot of conscious thought about it, and that was when it was planted, and it’s really only been in the last couple of years, probably, that I’ve really started thinking about, OK, what is whiteness to me? And I still haven’t answered that question, necessarily.

Q: So, it sounds like before you didn’t think much about your race at all.

Spencer: Right.

Q: So now, how often do you think about your race now?

Spencer: [16:46:15] Probably. And again, I’m going to say these last couple of years especially, which coincided with me moving over here, getting involved with SURJ—Showing Up for Racial Justice—and realizing that I have to do my own work. I went to a four-and-a-half-day pretty intense workshop called White Men and Allies. I started realizing that it is really important for me to understand my privilege. And so now, I think about it probably daily. What does that

mean? Not necessarily talking about it daily, though. When I reflect, when I read, I'm going to do another six-day training called Doing Our Own Work, which, again, is all about that unraveling of whiteness. I want to continue to do my own work, because I'm starting to realize that if I don't do that, I can't really stand for injustice until I figure out how race has impacted me.

Q: Going on this journey, it sounds like it's been a pretty intense journey for the last couple of years, what has it been like for you personally to start working towards that stuff?

Spencer: [16:47:31] I'm by nature pretty reflective. I've enjoyed that part of the journey, but it's caused some conflicts with my family. It's helped me put into words, for myself, why I haven't felt comfortable with my family in a long time. And when I say my family, I'm mostly talking about both sets of parents. My parents divorced, and they've both remarried since, but I feel like my experiences have shaped me in a way that has taken my path away from their experiences. So, there's a gap there, and so that's been kind of uncomfortable. I had just sort of been just dealing with it, and I love my parents, but a lot of times I go to holidays feeling more obligated than really wanting to go. Last year after the election, it was a particularly low time for me, and I thought I don't know if I can sit through Thanksgiving again and listen to people talk about things I don't care about when there's so many horrible things going on in the world. So, it has caused a lot of tension.

I'm trying to balance the fact that my parents are—well, my dad just turned eighty this year, so I want him to understand where I'm coming from, but do I really want to sacrifice the relationship for that? So, that's a tension I'm also holding.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your family growing up? Your parents growing up and what their views are in relation?

Spencer: [16:49:27] Sure. So, growing up, we didn't talk about race, but I was given the message that we respect all people. But it was kind of that colorblindness. I know my dad was in sports, and so he'd played on lots of integrated teams and everything, but I just don't ever remember one single conversation about race. I remember being at my grandparents', and my grandma using the word "nigger." I don't remember now if it was my dad or my mom, but my grandma was quickly ushered into the other room, and there was some excited conversation going on. I was really young. That's a really fuzzy memory, but I just don't ever remember talking about race with my parents ever.

Q: So, if they were saying they should respect everybody, they say that when your grandma started talking this way, they went and talked to her about it, what is causing the conflict now. Do they have a different set of viewpoints about the world than they had back then?

Spencer: [16:50:42] No. What's causing the conflict now is my increasing consciousness about white privilege, and the fact that I want my parents to understand. For example, what's really brought it to a head actually this year, is I decided—I'm a huge NFL fan, huge, and it's

something my dad and I share. We, for the last few years, have watched games together, but texting. So, we're in different places, but we're watching together because we're texting back and forth.

And with the whole Colin Kaepernick protest and me continuing to think about, OK, what am I really sacrificing? I have these beliefs, I have these strong beliefs, but what am I sacrificing? I show up at a few marches, but this man has lost his livelihood for all intents and purposes. Black people are continuing to die; men and women at the hands of police. And I decided I'm not watching this year. I'd always had to kind of rationalize it anyway because I disagree with the NFL and the way they treat domestic violence, and I'm a woman watching this league, and so I always kind of had some conflict, but it was like, Oh, it's sports, it's a game. Well, this isn't even that I think I'm going to change anything. It's that I feel like I'm sacrificing something for my beliefs.

And so, my dad has had a hard time with that, and then I don't know. When I've tried to explain it to him, he's coming from a place of white male privilege, I feel like, that he probably isn't aware of, and so I'm trying to explain this concept of white privilege, and he's getting defensive because he grew up poor, he was the first person in his family to go to college, and so I'm – and we never talked about it, so there are no scripts, and we mostly text, so to try to do this via text is complicated. That's really been the biggest difference is me deciding I'm not just going to be quiet anymore, because being quiet, I feel like, is what got Trump elected and led to so many of these things. We have to start speaking up, I feel. And so, he sees me as being a little too radical. Possibly.

Q: So, this idea of sacrifice; that you need to sacrifice something. In order to work towards racial justice, and sounds like you're committed to working to deconstruct white supremacy, that's what SURJ's mission is. Do white people have to sacrifice? Is it a zero sum game? If someone like you who cares about racial justice, cares about deconstructing white supremacy, what are the obligations that come with that?

Spencer: [16:53:54] Yes. And I struggle with that, right? No. I don't want to make that choice for everybody else and say, you know what? In order for you to be an ally, you need to sacrifice something. That's my stance, but where I draw the line is when you aren't even going to be introspective. So, you have to be on the journey. You don't have to be where I am. You don't have to look through the same lens, but you have to put yourself on the journey, and you haven't to acknowledge that we are a country that's built on white supremacy. And I have less and less tolerance for people that can't at least acknowledge that much, and I'm willing to work with them for a while, and am I going to end my relationship with my dad? Of course not. I love him, but I get really impatient when he can't at least acknowledge that there's some privilege there. So for me, you don't have to respond the way I'm responding, but you have to at least—I don't know. I want people to be able to acknowledge it, but because we are white, we do have somewhat of an obligation to use our privilege for good.

Q: And besides you deconstructing white supremacy, when you deconstruct something, you're essentially creating something else in its place. That's something I think a lot about when I talk to people who are in the process of working towards deconstructing white supremacy, they're

part of organizations like SURJ or Black Lives Matter, what are we moving towards? Is it erasure of whiteness and white culture? If white culture is white supremacy, and white culture is built on white supremacy, deconstructing it, what happens to whiteness?

Spencer: [16:55:52] I don't hold those as equal. I actually think my whiteness was a lot more invisible to me before I started learning about white supremacy culture. I honestly think that whiteness, at least the vision I hold, if my experience is parallel, there's going to be some similarities to what other allies are experiencing, then I think whiteness will become more visible. It may not be the whiteness, though, that we equate with men with tiki torches flaming. But I think part of the problem is that people don't know what it means to be white, so they don't have anything to fall back on right now, which is why they're so scared. I feel like that's why there's so much cultural appropriation because African Americans have a culture, Hispanics have a culture, Iraqis, Muslims have a culture, at least perceived by other people, and in particular there's a lot of appropriation of African American culture. But I think some of that would go away if we all figure out what it is to be white.

So, for example, if I start thinking about—even if you take the question of food—when my students asked me, “What kind of food do you eat?” Well, I did start thinking about some of the recipes my grandma cooked, and she did bring some recipes with her from Germany. I mean, if you're looking at culture as food. Which is a very surface part of it, but I never thought about it like that before. I never even thought about that much. I think culture becomes more visible, and you have to work to figure out, what is my culture?

Q: So, is it about loss or gain? Because I think that a lot of times when you talk to people about deconstructing white supremacy, they think about it in terms of loss. So, you're talking about your white [unclear], giving up certain privileges, is it about loss? How do you navigate that?

Spencer: [16:58:08] I think that's a dichotomy, loss or gain. I think it as a both-and I think, of course, any change is loss and gain. You're always going to lose something, and again, I can only speak for my experience—I'm gaining so much in terms of self-understanding. I'm learning a lot about—I think before I really started being involved with this these last couple of years really intentionally, I look back and I can see that I was, at times, going in—when I went into teaching, it was a second career for me. I wanted to make a difference.

I see shades of me at that early on in my career swooping in to save people from their cultures. Let me help you. And not standing beside them. Now, I think that phased out, and I think by the time I was at Covert I was much more about empowering my kids to make a difference in their own lives, but there was still that element of, I'm going to save you from yourself; I'm going to save you from this culture, instead of recognizing and looking at things from a strength-based perspective. I guess for me, that's been a little bit of the loss. I'm not anymore the hero teacher in the classroom, but I'm also learning what it means to just not have to be in front of the work all the time, either, and just that's what I've gained. Maybe a little bit more community value, too. I would say it's both loss and gain.

Q: How attached are you to your own whiteness?

Spencer: [17:00:08] So, in terms of how much I'm attached to my own whiteness, I guess I'm not that attached to it. And, again, maybe it's because I just haven't thought about. Maybe that's a phase I haven't gone through yet. Maybe as I start figuring out what this thing called whiteness is I'll get more attached. I think a lot of it comes from me teaching for really twelve of my twenty years were spent teaching in schools that were almost all other cultures. I had to let go of my culture some then just learn how to relate, because you have to step into other people's culture, at least that's how I chose to do it as a teacher, and be willing to learn about their culture. I'm not sure; I think I've always been pretty detached.

Q: So, if you're detached from it, would that mean that you would have no issue about giving up your whiteness? Meaning if somebody said go through that door, there's a fifty-fifty chance you'll emerge Caucasian, or another where you're guaranteed to emerge white, which door would you pick? Would you not care?

Spencer: [17:01:19] Oh, that's an interesting question. Would I give up my whiteness that way? No, I wouldn't. I guess I am attached in that sense. Wow. So, huh. So, maybe there's some attachment in the sense that you get treated like shit if you are a minority in this country. I don't know, can I swear on this [laughter]? So, yes. So, if you didn't give me any reason, and I just walked through those doors, I wouldn't walk through just to do it, but you said, you know what, you walking through those doors is going to mean that these people over here can have a better life, then I probably would. Honestly, I'd have to have a reason to do it. Would I walk through that door and give up my whiteness without a reason? No, probably not. And is that why I do

things like try to find out other ways I can sacrifice and use the privilege I know I have to show up and make things better for other people? I think that's why I'm so intentional about it.

Q: So, when you were saying that whiteness is going to be more visible in the future, but not necessarily look like [unclear] looks like, what, ideally, does it look like?

Spencer: [17:03:02] So, when I said that whiteness might be more visible, but it would look different if I have a vision of that, it doesn't look like top-down like it looks now. It doesn't look like white is normal; it looks like white being able to coexist with other cultures. So, white and run through all the cultures exist in our countries where whiteness doesn't feel like it has to defend itself, it doesn't feel like it has to take an attacking stance or a defensive stance, it can just be, and it can coexist and embrace other cultures and embrace itself.

Q: Have you ever consciously used your race to get something that you wanted?

Spencer: [17:04:01] No, but I used my education level to get things that I want all the time. I haven't used my race, but I can use because I'm a highly educated professional, I'm very verbal. If I'm angry, I can take my vocabulary up about three notches, and humiliate people. I've done that; I've done that in anger. I've been called out on it by a colleague. And if I get stopped by a cop—which I haven't in a while; I should find wood to knock on—I can use, oh, I'm a public servant, you're a public servant kind of thing to get out of the ticket. But I don't know that I've ever used my whiteness to get what I wanted. That's a good question that I'd have to ponder some more.

Q: When you think of the hierarchy of your identity, how would you describe yourself? You're a teacher, you're a woman, I don't know if you're a mom, if you're this, but how would you say, "These are the most important things about me. This is who I am"?

Spencer: [17:05:13] How I would describe myself in terms of intersectionality and how my identities kind of fall into some kind of hierarchy, I think being a woman is probably right at the top. I was raised – my mom was a traditional homemaker, but I was very definitely raised with the idea that I can do whatever I wanted to do. I remember my dad being very involved in taking me to news—I went to the news desk in Grand Rapids, WZZM, I think it was, because he knew the anchor. And so I could sit behind the desk. And he said, "See, maybe you want to be a journalist." And I remember going to work with him one day. I'm such a feminist because of the way that I was raised. I definitely didn't feel like I was limited to traditional gender roles, even though my parents were in traditional gender roles. So, that would be at the top.

I am a mom, and I'm a grandma, so that's right up there as well. There were a lot of times, though, that I put my career before my daughter, and so I regret that now, but I would say that was a really important identity. I think the reason that I've been able to do so much intensive work the last couple years on myself was because I stepped out of the classroom, and career is still important to me, but it doesn't drive everything I do, because before the career and my values were so aligned, and I was just really driven to make the world a better place for my students. And I think sometimes my daughter suffered because of that. I remember saying to her when she was quite a bit older, but saying, you know what? These kids need me. You are so

lucky to have the life you have. Well, she needed me, too, and I didn't necessarily see that then as clearly as I do now.

Q: It's interesting that you didn't, after all this work on whiteness, that you didn't quote whiteness into your hierarchy of identity.

Spencer: [17:07:29] Yes, that's true, I didn't, did I? And because even though it's been a couple of years, this is a new journey for me. I'm not sure. When you ask me who I am, white just wouldn't really come out. Obviously it didn't come out at the top. No, if you had said if you'd use the word race, I can identify as white, but that comes back to how attached am I to it? I don't know. Yes, I just don't know.

Q: And I guess, would you say that being white had a bigger impact on your life, or being a woman had a bigger impact on it?

Spencer: [17:08:12] I think, probably, being a woman has had a bigger impact on— well, although, see, so now what I'm feeling is in conflict with what I've read. Because what I know is whiteness is invisible; we're swimming in it. So, what really has had a bigger impact on my life? I would say on my identity, gender, but on my opportunities? On the opportunities that I've had, probably my race. Probably being white has afforded me an excellent high school education. I was raised with the expectation that I would just go to college. It wasn't about, "Are you going?" it was about "What college do you want to go to?" I would think, in terms of opportunities, race had something more to do with it.

Q: It's interesting you changed your mind inside that inside.

Spencer: [17:09:12] I know. And that's because I'm still learning. I don't know. And I read so much that I don't always do the work of integrating it into my life. I'm reading. I'm up in my headspace, but I'm not so far on the journey yet that I know that I've integrated and applied it all. Yes, it is interesting.

Q: It's very easy to, when you get really interested in something, not actually see yourself inside the paradigm. You just kind of understand the paradigm, and totally get it, but at a certain point you've kind of ejected yourself out of it. And that's your feelings on how you experience the world, are your feelings on how you experience the world and your experience as a woman constantly being reminded of that life. The thing is that you haven't constantly been reminded about your whiteness; it's just happened.

Spencer: [17:10:13] Right, except for when I was teaching at Covert, and my kids would often joke and call me "cracker," and I would say, "OK, I'm a Ritz, though, because I've got all these freckles." I mean, we joked about race all the time, but it was a very affectionate joking. And so, and then I wonder if I might have answered differently then. I don't know. I can't tell you that for sure. That became very normal to me to be the only white person, or one of very few white people in the room. That was very normal to me.

Q: Let's talk more about culture. You talked about black culture and white culture. What is white culture, or is there a white culture?

Spencer: [17:10:57] I don't know. At this point, is there a white culture? Is there really one black culture? I think we have one black stereotypical culture, but I experience my families of color, there were a lot of different cultures. Each family has its culture. I don't know that there is a white culture. Not one I want to be part of. There's a lot of negativity right now around whiteness that I try very hard to distance myself from.

Q: Can you choose not to be part of white culture as a white woman? Can you choose? How do you choose not to be a part of white culture as an educated white woman with excellent vocabulary?

Spencer: [17:11:45] I'm kind of laughing, because this is something that—yes. Because when people see me, they experience me as white. They don't know me, and that part is really hard for me. One of the things about teaching in a tiny school like Covert is that people very quickly know you. They know what you stand for, and my students knew how much I cared about them, and my colleagues knew what I stood for, and for those ten years I kind of could, maybe not walk away from my whiteness, but I didn't get stereotyped because of it. Now I walk by a person of color maybe on the street, or maybe wherever, and I think, gosh, do they think I'm just one of these—what are they thinking about it? And I feel even a certain sense of loss because I just see more clearly the boundaries that were there between us that might prevent us from ever having any kind of casual conversation just because of the race difference.

Q: We talked about loss—

Spencer: We talked a little bit about loss. We touched on that gain and loss piece.

Q: Yes, because I think a lot of this discussion is managing the concept of loss. It's really interesting about this idea of managing the idea of loss and gain, and really interesting this discussion on who you are as a white person in the context of someone who is actively trying to deconstruct white supremacy, or at least understand and mitigate its effect on their own lives, and yet you're a part of an existing structure. I recognize it's a complex task. It's an interesting discussion, because lots of different people have sat in that chair the last few days, from being in SURJ to gun-rights supporters, hardcore Trump supporters, and all different races. It's interesting to talk to you who are actually thinking about it a lot, and for a lot of people it's the first time we've had this conversation.

Spencer: So, it's a lot different, I would imagine, then.

Q: It's pretty different. So, what is our obligation? What are the things that we should be advocating for trying to create? If you feel, as a white person who has benefitted from white supremacy and has a legacy of legacy from benefitting from white supremacy, what is our obligation as white people to mitigate the effects of white supremacy? If we're talking—and I don't mean financial reparations or making amends, what is our obligation, and what are the

structures that we should support, what are the structures that actually will be efficacious in order to mitigate the damage of white supremacy, both in the white community and black?

Spencer: [17:15:27] I think what white people need to do in order to deconstruct white culture, or at least the negative effects of it, we need to be able to walk towards discomfort instead of shielding ourselves. I'll use an example. It's clearly not comfortable to a large chunk of America that people are kneeling for the National Anthem right now, for example. However, when did we get so wrapped up in our flag, because this isn't really about the flag? So, that's something we need to look at, too. What is it about the flag that sets people off? So, actually, can a flag be an institution? We need to look at what it is, why is anybody who dares to have a voice, and is doing it very peacefully, and we're not talking about violent protest, why are they held up as anti-American? I mean, to me, that's white people wanting to stay comfortable. That's people that don't want to have that conversation about there are some real dangerous things happening. People are dying; what are we doing about it?

As an educator, this is a tightrope that I walk all the time because I'm presenting to schools, I'm presenting to teachers that don't necessarily share my views, that haven't done work on white culture. I know from my reading and I know from my own experience that schools are so change-resistant. So change-resistant. And we know they perpetuate the status quo, and I also know I need a paycheck. I want this platform. I mean, one of the reasons I came up to the ISD [Intermediate School District] level, I want a platform from which I can start to do some work, but our public education system has to be one of the institutions we look at, and we've got to find a way to change it. I don't know what that looks like yet.

I'm constantly balancing my personal beliefs with, "OK, how far do I want to push this person? What's appropriate?" But I am trying. I'm inserting equity work, and the things I'm learning as much as I can in any professional development I'm doing regardless of the topic. When a teacher in one of my trainings last week said something about "those kids", I pushed back. I did it appropriately, and really what I found was it opened up the dialogue. So, it's been me as a rather new employee to this place. I'm just starting my third year now, so starting to get more comfortable. That's the niche that I'm comfortable looking at. I don't feel like my experience lends itself to other areas, like I pay attention to politics, but I'm not a politician. There's a lot in our government that needs to change, but I don't know what those issues are. Education is a safe place, because I feel like I know whose lane is what, and where I might begin to start making those changes.

Q: What about as an educator, Affirmative Action? Is Affirmative Action something that—or race based scholarships, or [unclear] in Michigan there was a really big [unclear]. So, as an educator, do you think those things should exist, shouldn't exist, are fair, unfair, do they help, do they hurt?

Spencer: [17:19:35] I definitely think that Affirmative Action does help. I also think, probably about my second or third year in Covert, so that's probably been about a little over ten years ago, they being the universities, so U of M [University of Michigan], Michigan State [University], Central [Michigan University], Western [Michigan University] —started getting into it, recruiting our kids who weren't necessarily university ready yet, but they would bring them in, and they would do summer programs with them to get them where they needed to be. There's a

program called CAMP [College Assistance Migrant Program] —it's an acronym. I don't remember what it stands for—that helps students of migrant workers, farm workers—so predominantly Hispanic in this area—pays for their education, makes sure they have tutors to help them get to where they need. I've personally see students succeed through those. Students that may not have gotten a shot otherwise. I definitely think programs like that are helpful.

Q: Are they fair to white students who are also coming out of poverty and struggling families? There's more white people living in poverty [unclear] color. So, it is fair to white students who don't have access to those same programs?

Spencer: [17:21:00] We need to find a way. We talked previously about what that might look like if white culture was side by side. If we stopped looking at it as a dominant culture, and if it indeed was no longer the dominant culture, yes, it would be fair. Right now, for example, the CAMP program wasn't necessarily limited to Hispanic kids. You could have been a white kid with your parents, as long as they did predominantly farm work, and they were under the poverty level. So, they shouldn't be open—I don't know. I think this is a case-by-case basis. That's a hard question.

Q: This is what I'm trying to understand, is that actually you can tell I'm a very progressive, liberal person, but what are our obligations, what are the mechanisms to meet those obligations, and how do you—

Spencer: How do you do it, yes.

Q: —is life unfair? I don't know how—

Spencer: I don't know either.

Q: —answer any of these questions, but I guess when I've talked to a lot of people, there's a lot of people on the Right that say this is what it is. They have a very clear idea of what the structure is.

Spencer: Well, of course they do.

Q: When I talk to people on the Left who are progressive, there's a lot of talk of dismantlement.

Spencer: But what are we going to put in there?

Q: What does the remantlement [*sic*]—I don't know if that's a word.

Spencer: Sure, what's the reconstruction look like.

Q: What does it look like? What is that? And when you talk about white as no longer the dominant culture, is there really a possibility for the United States [of America] not to be a white supremacist dominant culture. I'm not just saying it in a pejorative way, just—

Spencer: Right; just is it possible?

Q: Is it possible? And what's the timeline?

Spencer: [17:23:09] Yes, I know. You had said that people on the right have this often quite clear structure in mind, and people on the left—for me, it's a lot muddier because I'm in it a lot deeper. Things look pretty neat if you've ever been up in an airplane, there's those beautiful green squares where the fields are, and things are very neat. I feel like for people who think in absolutes, it's neater; it's black or it's white. And I'm not even talking in a race sense. It's right or it's wrong. It's that dichotomy. As I've been doing this work, I've moved away from that dichotomy a lot. It can't be one thing or another always. It's sometimes got to be both, and it's messy. Do I think it has to be fair? No. It hasn't been fair forever.

So, where I get caught up is with the kids. Let me talk about Affirmative Action. I think Affirmative Action should be, and yes, sometimes it won't seem fair, but we have to reverse and give people starting points somewhere. It's harder for me with kids because that's where my heart is. So, that's not much of an answer in terms of the reconstruction.

Q: It's a real answer.

Spencer: It is. I don't know the answer.

Q: I'm very wary of people that have answers. All I have is questions. I guess I have just a couple more questions. One is Battle Creek. You've lived here how long?

Spencer: [17:25:03] Well, I've worked in the community going on my third year. I commuted the first year, so I'm very new.

Q: So, your experience is sort of as an outsider. You look at this community, and there's a lot of work of racial equity in the community, and obviously you're a member of SURJ in the community. What is sort of your coming as an outsider, how does this community look on sort of the spectrum of an equitable community, and where are the areas that you think things need to change, or things need to happen?

Spencer: [17:25:43] Sure. So, as a relative newcomer to Battle Creek, and knowing all of the equity work that has been going on, that's actually one reason I decided to move here. I mean, I was living all the way over in St. Joe's [St. Joseph, Michigan], so I wasn't going to keep up that commute. Originally, I had thought I'd move to Kalamazoo, because my daughter's still over in St. Joe and my granddaughter, and I wanted to be a little closer there, but I was really intrigued by all the equity work that's going on. The Center for Diversity and Innovation has made some good inroads. When I was in White Men and Allies, which is one of their programs, I was in there with firefighters and police officers, so the city is really committed to getting their people through at least this training. National Equity Project [NEP] has been brought in—I think Kellogg probably funded that—and there's like a Battle Creek vision that's been the results of that, and so I attended some training this summer from NEP, which is open to schools.

So, there's a lot of training, and I can't speak to how embedded it's been in the other—like, I don't know before and after for city government. I don't know how it's made a difference for the police department or the fire department. I can say with educators, I'm still far left. I don't feel like there's—for the NEP training that was going on this summer, there were basically Battle Creek was there, Harper Creek, Lakeview had a lot of people there, Pennfield had some people there, the ISD had a few people there, but the conversations that I was having, those one on one conversations that you do as part of equity trainings, I didn't feel like people really had a clear idea of why they were there. I felt like there was a lot of resistance. I honestly felt like people were there for the stipends or the money that they were getting paid to be there.

I hate to sound like a pessimist, but I don't know—I mean, this is just hard work, and do I think I'm going to see change in my lifetime? I'm not sure. I mean, this city, I want to be somewhere where at least the values are espoused, and hope that eventually they get lived out. I guess that's my hope.

Q: Well, you have seen change. There's change right here.

Spencer: Well, yes, yes, yes. Absolutely, there is that. Yes. But I like change. A lot of people are just change-resistant.

Q: I want to know a little bit about a couple things, and then we'll wrap up. Are you religious?

Do you believe in God? Do you have a religious disposition? Do you attend church?

Spencer: [17:28:44] I am spiritual, but I do attend church, too. I really raised my daughter in the Unity Church, so, again, pretty left, pretty new age-y. Lots of work done on yourself. That was the right place for me, especially after my divorce. I just needed to figure out who I was, and so Unity was a wonderful place for her to grow up. I didn't attend church for quite a while. By the time she was in high school, we were not really attending church, but I still read spiritual readings. I'm a big fan of Sun Myung Kid [phonetic] and her stuff, so I was constantly always reading things. When I moved over here, I decided I'd like to get involved in a church, and I tried Unity in Kalamazoo, and it was OK. I didn't mind it, but I just recently maybe six weeks ago found a Universal Unitarian Church over in Kalamazoo that I really, really like. It's a good fit. So, for me, it's got to be a fit with the people. It's not so much about I've got to go to church every Sunday. That's not really what it is. That's why I say I'm more spiritual. But UUCC [Unitarian Universalist Community Church] is really, there's a lot of people there that are activists. It's an older congregation, so I think a lot of them are hippies. I'm still learning about them, but literally I think some of them are.

Q: Is Christianity in the church, despite the fact that it's in—considered the most segregated hour of the week is eleven and twelve, despite the fact that Christianity has sort of institutionally perpetuated white supremacy. Is it a necessary forum or valuable forum for doing some of this work?

Spencer: [17:30:40] I think so. And ironically, church might be the most segregated institution, but it's also got the most hope. I look at things like—right now, we're revising our church mission, and we're talking about what does it really mean to serve others? Why are we assuming

they have to come to us? How can we get out there? I kind of feel like churches are a good mechanism to reach people. I don't so much think that we avoid each other as churches. Although, I'm sure there's some of that going on; it's also just an organization thing. How do you do it? SURJ for a long time here has talked about we need to get into the churches, but nothing's happening. It's a lack of organization as much as anything. But I see the church as a place of real hope.

Q: There's an organization called the Auburn Seminary that is a non-denominational seminary that works in churches all around the country to help teach them how to incorporate deconstructing white supremacy. Hopefully we're going to be working with them as part of this project.

Spencer: What's it called again?

Q: Auburn Seminary.

Spencer: OK. Auburn Seminary. OK.

Q: I think one of the issues is that a lot of people who do this work are atheist.

Spencer: Oh, sure, I didn't think about that.

Q: We need to get into the church, and you're going to come in as an atheist and tell me about my belief system? Are you kidding me?

Spencer: That's problematic to say the least. No, that's OK, that's OK.

Q: Two more questions. Actually, three more questions. The first one is, I'm guessing you're politically Left, and how does your political—I don't even know that I have to have the political discussion with you on this, because I'm really interested in the relationship with people's politics and their belief systems. And many times I find that they're in conflict with each other, and it seems, I'm guessing, that your political beliefs and your racial beliefs and your politics kind of all come together.

Spencer: [17:32:46] Yeah. My politics, yes. But I can say this. I'm really not a very political person, and I feel like what galvanized me was Trump getting elected. I voted and everything, but that's about it. I didn't vote in local elections, I really haven't done that, I'm now trying to educate myself a lot more at the local level because I just feel like maybe that was me using some of that privilege. Well, it doesn't change my world, necessarily, that he's in office, other than being pissed off twenty-four/seven, but other than that—I think my politics, for me, it's not even so much about politics. When I listen to MSNBC, I'm listening for more of the social justice side of things. If they start talking too much about healthcare—although, I realize that's a huge issue—it just doesn't hold my interest. So, it's not so much the politics, it's what's underneath, and they have to align for me.

Q: Well, that's because you get healthcare through your—

Spencer: Exactly, right? There's another piece of privilege, right?

Q: Those of us who are freelance.

Spencer: Well, my daughter may lose her insurance, though, because she's twenty-three, right?

She's on there because of Obamacare.

Q: Two things. One is, what has the process been like participating in this project for you, doing the surveys, and having this conversation?

Spencer: [17:34:15] So, it's actually been pretty comfortable other than the whole camera thing, but I'm used to it now. That's just because I've been doing some of this work. Like at some of the SURJ things, I've had these conversations, and because I've been doing so much of my inner-work, that survey, I just breezed through it because I already know where I stand. I tried to be like, OK now, where am I standing right now on this, and tried to be more thoughtful about it because you sort of knee jerk all the way over.

Q: And is there anything that we didn't touch on that you think that you wanted to say that was important to include in this?

Spencer: [17:34:56] No, actually. You've given me some things to think about, like that whole—yes. Just that piece about walking through that door. I don't know. I'm going to be pondering that. So, no, I got exactly what I wanted out of the process, which was to support somebody who's trying to do this work, but also selfishly to continue my—any time I can talk about this at this deep of a level it helps me understand more.

Q: Great. Well, thank you very much.

Spencer: Yeah, no problem.

END OF INTERVIEW