

1 GVP50, Vaun Mayes

2 (inaudible)

3 D: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

4 V: Yes ma'am. My name is Van Mayes. I'm 32 years old, originally from here, born in

5 Milwaukee March 1st, 1987. I guess I would be considered a activist and advocate for the city

6 and in some, in some lanes, nationally. I'm a very hardworking person but I'm also known to be

7 very controversial, but I am just a resident of this city. And just somebody who's looking to do

8 whatever I can to help better the city and the people.

9 D: Well, you said your age, what nationality are you?

10 V: So, (laughter) I am black, African American. All those different titles, but as far as nationality

11 I have proclaimed Moor.

12 D: Okay.

13 V: And so, a lot of people don't know about nationality or claiming nationality or proclaiming,

14 so, right, right now until I can get a blood or DNA test to see exactly where from the continent

15 my people are predominantly from, I bel-, I thought that to proclaim Moor is a step in that

16 direction. It's something, it's something that I could use for right now until I figure that part out.

17 D: Wow.

18 V: Yeah.

19 D: And what gender are you?

20 V: I am a male, a black male.

21 D: What neighborhood in Milwaukee do you live in?

22 V: I live in Sherman Park again. Right now [...].

23 D: Okay.

24 V: Yeah.

25 D: And how long have you lived there?

26 V: I have lived [in Sherman Park] for a year now.

27 D: And in reference to your gun violence experience, would you share that with us?

28 V: My gun violence experience is on both sides of the coin.

29 D: Okay.

30 V: As I explained to you earlier, as a young person I was involved in a lot of crime. I have never
31 personally shot or killed anyone in that manner, but we have used guns in crimes. And I myself
32 have been shot at once. It wasn't necessarily an intentional victimization of me in, in order to
33 harm me. I was being robbed and at the time I was so, so angry that I chased the person and they
34 was shooting back at me to keep me from chasing them.

35 D: Where were you when you were robbed?

36 V: I was [in Franklin Heights].

37 D: And what time of the day was it?

38 V: It, it was probably afternoon, around noon, after noon. That, that time. And the reason I was
39 so angry is because this is the block that I, so, you know, specifically grew up on, spent a lot of
40 time, knew a lot of people. So, to be robbed on what I considered my block, it was so, that was
41 so ang-, you know, made me so angry. But it also, at that time, I think, I believe I was 22 years
42 old. It was my, it was my signal that the streets were changing, and a lot of new people had
43 moved in and around. And just things were, wasn't the same. And at that time, I kind of knew
44 that I kind of have to leave the streets alone because at that point, how things were turning, I felt
45 like I would've had to progress myself in the manner that everybody else was. Which is, people
46 are going to be shooting at me and robbing me and stuff like that with my background and who I

47 was and all the work that I put in so called, that, it, it would escalate. And so, I just figured this
48 was my time to just leave it to the young people, you know I'm saying and, and, and move on.

49 D: When you say move it to the, leave it to the young people and move on, (pause) what does
50 that, what do you mean?

51 V: A lot of us are, you know, growing up on these blocks, especially as a teenager. We all, like,
52 noticed the older people. For me personally, it was like, a lot of males maybe twenty, twenty into
53 they thirties, like mid-thirties and they still around. They still engaged in the same, you know,
54 street stuff, fights, arguments just stuff we were doing. And I didn't want, I saw myself if I
55 continue leading, you know, being that. And I think a lot of times, things end up happening to us
56 because we don't progress and because we don't elevate ourselves. At least in mind thought, or
57 mind set of you know, leave childish things to a child, you know what I'm saying? To hang
58 around and kick it all day and get into trouble, that's not something a—an adult should do. You
59 know what I'm saying? And so, that's, that's a, a decision that I came to, and a realization I came
60 to.

61 D: Wow.

62 V: Yeah. (laughter)

63 D: (pause) When you were shot at, when you were robbed, did you cat—ever catch the person or
64 was he ever captured for your, for robbing you?

65 V: No, I actually, again, this is a person that, I knew a lot of people who were around that day
66 and, and pretty much everybody sat and watched me get robbed and that, that's par-, part of what
67 pissed me off. It's like, like I, some of y'all like, my actual friends and y'all, I almost felt like I
68 got set up. And again, like the person, even before shooting at me he made me lay on the ground.
69 I did it slow and I gave him a hard time and like, as I was getting robbed I just was so mad and,

70 and part of the story is I had a gun on me. And so, I think that's part of why I got robbed.
71 Because at this time I was trying to, I was trying to, I had been in Mississippi for a year. I come
72 back here to my block, you know what I'm saying. I had, you know, a car. I had been on tour for
73 music for a year. You know, I dressed nice, you know I'm saying. And I believe that, that they
74 were like, I guess the newer people who were around were kind of like either trying to prove
75 theself or like, kind of prove a point to me like, "I don't care who dude is." You know,
76 whatever the case may be. But as he was robbing me, I kept trying to get up and he kept, he was
77 hitting me in the back of my head with the gun and every time he did that, like, I didn't
78 physically feel it, but I knew if I, if I didn't, 'cause I attempted to get up, like maybe four or five
79 times and every time he hit me in the back of the head with the gun. And so, I just like, kind of
80 like, made myself stay down until he like, walked off 'cause I felt like maybe he would have shot
81 me at some point. But as he was walking off, again, I just got so mad again that I got up and start
82 chasing him. (laughter) And he was just like, shooting back at me and I wasn't even thinking
83 about, I was continuously chasing him and I just was not thinking at all. Like, I was like, so
84 blank and I was so mad and I don't know what made, I think it's he disappeared into a alley and I
85 felt like if, I think at that point, my mind kicked in and said, "Well, maybe if you go into this
86 alley, he might try to, you know, kill you." So, I just stopped. But, yeah that was my only real
87 experience personally, with gun violence.

88 D: Why did he, did you call the police and report it?

89 V: Absolutely not. (laughter)

90 D: Why, why not?

91 V: For one, because I feel like I was in a certain realm and world and there were rules to things.
92 And honestly, most times I believe a lot of stuff ends up correcting itself. I noticed that a lot of

93 our people, when we do call the police a lot of how that stuff works ends up putting you at more
94 risk and danger than you, than it helps. And a lot of us just avoid that. You cannot be labeled as a
95 snitch or even if you do come forward and you know, and pursue justice, lot of times that end up
96 backfiring on you because the person will know who told on them. It's no, it's really [...] no
97 such thing as anonymity because at some point your name is revealed, your, all your information
98 and you have no information on that person. So, now you have them and all they people knowing
99 who you are and having an issue with you, and you have no idea who this person is or anybody
100 associated with them and they're all like, kind of looking for you. You know what I'm saying?
101 So, a lot of people take that into account when it comes to dealing with the police and going
102 through that. That's why a lot of people end up taking things into their own hands and trying to
103 figure out who the person is and, take care of it themselves in a sense. And that's one of the
104 reasons we have perpetuated violence. It's not because of people just want to kill each other, it's
105 because people don't have no trust for that system and we f-, and, and they feel like they have to
106 take things into their own hands to get results or to (pause) to not be put in a, in those levels of
107 danger. You know what I mean?

108 D: So, if someone robs you and you know who it is, why would they, why wouldn't they expect
109 you to call the police? They would expect you to come to them instead? Explain that. (laughter)

110 V: A lot of times the person who robbed you, well, I think now a lot of people are like, this day
111 and age, at thirty-two the rules are a lot different. And even though, we still for the most part
112 have that, "No police" kind of policy, I think a lot of people are more willing to give that up or
113 you know what I'm saying? Just on the basis to, (pause) I don't know. I don't even know how to
114 explain it. It's like people are more prone to involve police, but then they're also still just as less
115 prone to. So, you have a, a number of people who like, (pause) who don't deal with the police,

116 but then you have a lot of people who do, even if they have bad experiences, they will. And some
117 people just I believe maybe have considered taking multiple routes instead of just one. So,
118 instead of just me looking for them like, now me and the police looking for them. So, either way
119 they get caught, it's kind of fine with me type of deal. So, I think people are like, coming out of
120 that, but then with everything going on people are still very reserved when it comes to that as
121 well.

122 D: Do you think the robbery could've been avoided and if so, how?

123 V: Yeah, it could've been avoided because one, knowing how the streets work I had been away
124 for a year. Knowing how often people move, I definitely, any year you can go probably to a
125 block, there's going to be somebody new on the block, somebody new in the area. So, those are
126 things that need to be taken in to account. This isn't like a lot of places where if you have a
127 reputation or if you're well known, like, a lot of people just respect that. Milwaukee's a very
128 testy city. You could be the worst killer ever and somebody going to be like, "He ain't nothing.
129 I'm, I'm worse." You know, and they going to test you. And that is like, a real big issue here. I
130 remember being in Mississippi and we were at a, you know, they kick it at like car washes. So,
131 we hit the car wash, middle of the night and this car pulls up and everybody stopped talking and
132 I'm, I'm from Milwaukee. I'm like, "What are y'all doing? Why everybody quiet?" (laughter)
133 And so somebody goes up to the car, they talk, and then the car drives off. Everybody start back
134 talking again. So, I'm like, "What the hell just happened?" And they like, "Aw man, dude a killer
135 man. Dude shot my cousin." Just like, (inaudible) "What the hell?" I'm being quiet 'cause I'm
136 like (inaudible) drove up. But that, they have that amount of respect or that amount of fear for a
137 person to know, this ain't somebody—

138 D: (inaudible)

139 V: Right. And so, you can be big and bad too, but I rather just not, you know I'm saying. Even
140 having experiences in they clubs, like, people would think more guns would like, equal worse
141 crime. But like, they clubs, when I went to they club and I paid my lil' money and then I like, put
142 my hands up to get pat searched and dude looked at me crazy, like, "What are you doing?"
143 (laughter) And I'm like, "What? Y'all pat, y'all don't pat people down here?" And he like,
144 "Naw." Man so, I, all my little friends came in, they all had they guns on. And everybody had
145 guns. And that, like, it made sense to me. Like, this is actually safer because, because people
146 don't know who all got guns and they know that people don't get searched, they not, they less
147 prone to start some stuff. You know what I'm saying?

148 D: Hmm

149 V: And that was always the case. It was always the case and so, I've just experienced like, a
150 bunch of different, different scenarios and things when it comes to that. And so, I'm able to adapt
151 to kind of both, both sides of the coin.

152 D: When you mentioned, how do you think we can reduce gun violence in Milwaukee?

153 V: First of all, we definitely need to do some work in the community as far as like, for instance,
154 we have this, we're in the Sherman Phoenix right now. Which is absolutely great and beautiful,
155 but it did not improve the community or the conditions of the area. Like, we, forty, thirty, forty
156 million dollars past the riots and this is the only thing you can see that's changed over here. And
157 this ain't no, you know, these are business owners. These are people who work for themselves,
158 employ people that they know. But where's the jobs, where's the opportunity for the people who
159 live around here? Who, you know what I'm saying? And that, that is one of the main, any place
160 you could find high poverty, you're going to have these issues. You going to have people getting
161 they stuff took. You going to have people who walk around angry and stressed out and all this

162 different, all these different type of feelings and emotions that people with less money don't,
163 they don't have to worry about. I left here when I was four years old. My momma sent me to live
164 in Mississippi with my uncle. So, from four to fourteen I lived in Greenwood, Mississippi. My
165 uncle was a, I think a Air Force guy. He worked for the FAA. And he owned his own car lot. So,
166 for ten years I got to go to private Catholic schools, I got to you know, know what it was to get
167 allowance and not have to worry about if our lights going to get cut off, or what I'm going to eat
168 tonight. Like nothing, those were not worries I had. So, was a lot, (pause) a lot more stable and
169 better just in life. 'Til when I came here and all of that was untrue, it was a quite, total opposite. I
170 never knew where I was going to live at. I never knew like, we never stayed in a address more
171 than a couple months, you know what I'm saying? Like, that's a totally different life and a lotta
172 people couldn't handle that. And so, the conditions is, like, add to why people are the way they
173 are. So, we have to start with the opportunity. We have to start with the empowerment of people.
174 But then we also have to start with the side of what I just explained earlier, about the sandwich.
175 The, the mentality of fake help. You know what I'm saying? There's a real, this is like a poverty
176 pimping city where you know, I'll hear about the history about how we had all these great
177 factory jobs and opportunities for families and people came here to bust they tail and, and work
178 for what they wanted. But then when that went away and you create this welfare system or this
179 system of you know, giving up something to get a little bit of something to where you had people
180 coming from all over just to come here to get on, on welfare because it was just so, you know,
181 ridiculous, the amounts you could get, or you know, all the opportunity for that. And that's still
182 true today. You know what I'm saying? I literally see all these organizations we have, so we
183 have like, some of the highest concentrations of non-profits like, then most places. Most places
184 you won't, you'll go, you won't find all these non-profits. But here it's so many of them allowed.

185 And it's this whole thing, what I told you about giving somebody a sandwich and not actually
186 helping them. But you gon—but you do just enough to keep them coming back to you. And it's
187 not actually improving their situation and it's not actually improving they condition so, that, that
188 portion of it, that mis—abuse of mis—of trust and that, that level of disingenuousness is—adds
189 to the, to the willingness of the people to be comfortable and to, to stay in survival mode. You
190 know what I'm saying? One thing I know about our work and the work of people around us, it's
191 very impactful. Like it's, it's life-changing work. Like, it's the difference from somebody living
192 or dying. It's the difference between somebody working or going to the streets. It's the
193 difference between somebody going to jail or remaining free.

194 D: What is, what is your work? And what is the name of your, your, your, your non-profit?

195 (laughter)

196 V: My non-profit is, "Program the Parks MKE". But we have a number of programs and
197 initiatives that are all different and do different things, but they're all kind of like, a fist. So,
198 everything is like interchangeable, interlockable. We have the MKE single parents club, we have
199 Com Force which is short for Community Task Force. We have our People's Public Pantry
200 program, we have our It Takes A Village, Community Empowerment and Solution Center. We
201 just have a, a lot of different things that kind of address the needs of all different things. So, like
202 as far as the, the Com Force, that's like the most universal program because literally, when I tell
203 you every issue that there's supposed to be a answer for, whether in non-profitism or in the, the
204 city, county, state realms, we have created alternative programs for it. So, when people lose they
205 Quest or are not getting it, or whatever the case may be.

206 D: What is Quest?

207 V: Quest is SNAP or Foodshare.

208 D: Okay.

209 V: Or, you know, Food Stamps.

210 D: Okay.

211 V: And for a long time, as a teenager, like, we would, my mom always had Quest. And so, when
212 I became an adult and I actually had to pay for food with cash, I, that was terrible. Like, you
213 spending two, three hundred dollars for food in cash. That is, man, like, so I understand why
214 people are so apt to run to that 'cause that's, that's a, a relief that a lot of people, and in this city
215 what a lot of people don't realize is there's like a, a kind of give and take system between the
216 under—the poor class and the middle class. Where the middle-class people would buy the
217 Stamps from the poor people who need the cash because they also know to spend, depending on
218 your family size, you spending anywhere between a hundred to five, six hundred dollars a month
219 in groceries when I can just give somebody half of what they Stamps is and spend like, two,
220 three times less than what I would spend in cash. So, I'm saving money and I'm helping this
221 person who need cash for whatever reason. So, there's like a brokering system between the two
222 classes that that was literally was dependent on.

223 D: Let me as you a question, if I'm giving you cash and I'm only giving you half, sorry, of what
224 the Stamps or Quest is really valued at—

225 V: Mhmm.

226 D: Aren't I taking advantage of you?

227 V: I think, I don't know who came up with that system, but I think in their mind, that was like, a
228 deal that was so good nobody, nobody can really turn that down. If, if you can get twenty dollars
229 for ten dollars' worth of stuff, like, that's just like a deal like, I can't damn near pass up. And
230 that's why people are so open to, to that exchange. You know what I'm saying?

231 D: But aren't I takin' advantage of you?

232 V: No, because I think the, I think the deal came from the other side. I didn't think it was
233 something that the person with the cash did. You know what I mean? So, in a sense, I think that
234 was just like, I don't know who came up with that or how it became like, the law, but do, you do
235 have people who like, say if you have a situation and it's like, "Well, I need, I got a bill and it's
236 \$275. But I got \$300 in Stamps, which is \$150 bucks." Some people will give you like, the \$275
237 for \$300 dollars in Stamps and save \$25. Like, some people will do that.

238 D: Okay.

239 V: But most of the time it end up being a half. And a lot of people that I know either who, who
240 do that usually have a high number of stamps. So, they'll have maybe like five, to like, a
241 thousand, five hundred to like, a thousand dollars and they'll sell a certain amount. They'll be
242 like, "Well, this the amount I'm going to sell and this the amount I'm going to keep." So, the, it,
243 it depends on the person and it depends on the buyer. So.

244 D: I've heard of it. But I just thought that I was taking advantage of someone.

245 V: It depends on how you look at it, but for somebody who would rather, I mean, who doesn't
246 have any cash and they need the cash, I mean most, most of the stuff we run to is really taken
247 advantage of, them Payday Loans, all that stuff, loans with the high interest rates, it's all the
248 same thing. You know what I'm saying? And so, I think people are you know, so used to I guess,
249 low balling or being low-balled that, that, that kind of just like, at least I'm getting' something
250 that I feel is worth it. You know what I'm saying?

251 D: Okay.

252 V: So.

253 D: How do you think we could lower gun violence in our community?

254 V: I have something that I call, and I never put it in the same order, ever, but it's called
255 collaborative, cooperative, collaborative, (pause) Consistent Collaborative Cooperation. I'm
256 going to have to—it's like, it's like three or four c's. But what we don't find is when you see, a
257 lot of days these people on the news and they doing conferences and they had this whole little
258 squad of people with them, it's usually somebody that's not included that should be. And that's
259 part of the problem. When we talk about unity, one thing I've always been like, stuck on is like,
260 unity ain't bringing everybody together, it's bringing the right people together. So, if you have a
261 team of 30 people and 29 of them people are full of BS, don't really have a team. But if you have
262 five people who all are like, high quality people. That can like, do wonders. You know what I'm
263 saying? And it's so much of that, that again, like it short-changes the, the work, it short-changes
264 the impact and it short-changes the change. And if we have that on all different levels, like we
265 should have a mayor, we should have a alderperson who you don't have to hunt down. Like, if
266 it's something wrong they should be like, putting feelers out, figuring out who's doing stuff in
267 the community, who they should be talking to, who they should have a relationship with and not
268 the other way around. I shouldn't have to go find my alderperson and build a relationship with
269 them.

270 D: Right.

271 V: You know what I'm saying? Especially if I'm doing high levels and high-quality work in their
272 district, you know what I'm saying? And so, because we don't have those levels of cooperation
273 and unity on those fronts, it just makes it all the more difficult for people to get stuff done. And
274 to have greater impacts than what they do. And I think that is a huge key to tackling this stuff.
275 The other thing is, we have to be honest, like, we spend so much time even though we have these

276 labels of being like highly segregated, racist, all this different kind of stuff, people run from that.
277 And they try to hide it all the time. But that's really what most of the problem is. If you address
278 those problems, then you can kind of unravel some of the damages that's, have been done and
279 that's in place. For one, there's this conversation about decarceration and mass incarceration. We
280 know that's built on a system of racism and a system of, of foc—zeroing in on a specific group
281 of people. No matter where they at, not just in Milwaukee.

282 D: Right.

283 V: But when I was doing work in Madison and they telling me like, only twelve percent of the
284 population is so-called black, but they make up past fifty percent of the jails, that's a problem.
285 And I can, I can walk down you know, downtown or in any of these little around suburb and sub-
286 cities and it don't matter what this white person doing while they driving, they looking for me.
287 (laughter) Like, they trying to pull me over. You know?

288 D: Right.

289 V: That's a problem.

290 D: Yeah.

291 V: And because we are not addressing that, because we are not fixing those things, we allowing
292 them to continue perpetuating, that is going to always be a major thing holding, holding this
293 community, and this city, and this state back from progression and from, from understanding
294 what needs to be done. They building jobs everywhere else but here, you know what I'm saying?
295 They giving out opportunities to everybody else except for us. Even the point where I've had,
296 like, I've literally found myself going to the zoning and licensing boards having to fight for black
297 businesses. And it's like, y'all allow eighteen people who not black to come in here and put all,
298 any kind of business they want, which is usually liquor or some corner store or something.

299 D: Right.

300 V: But as soon as one of us want to do the same thing, you tell us there's too many of them over
301 there and those ones that's over there, y'all not even cracking down on them. They shouldn't
302 even be open. So, it's just so, so many barriers and roadblocks that a lot of people would think of
303 it as excuses, but actually it's not. It's not. It's just not fair. And a lot of people are getting some
304 type of help or push or assistance, but we're made to feel bad for it. Because of how the
305 propaganda is, how we're shown. "Y'all black people on h—on welfare too much." Well,
306 statistically it's more white people on it than, than us. But we'll say that to each other. Like, you
307 know, we'll call each other ghetto and welfare babies and all that because it's, that's, we been
308 fed that. And so, that's how we think of each other. And that's how the rest of the world looks at
309 us. In regard, you know, disregard what the actual facts are, so just, we have to be honest and
310 open about what our issues are as a people and as a city. And then, address them. Instead of like,
311 dancing around it and cons- and allowing things to be perpetuated.

312 D: Wow, that's very well said.

313 V: Yes ma'am.

314 D: Was the person who robbed you, was he ever caught?

315 V: I actually don't know 'cause I don't, I don't know who it was. Like I said, I personally had
316 never seen him before.

317 D: Okay.

318 V: And, and my, me personally, how I was like, even now, I don't go out of my way to know
319 people or learn who people are. Like, most people just know who I am and I always like, kind of
320 been to myself like that. It was a small amount of guys that I dealt with and we was a tight knit
321 group and like, people that they were, they were cool with a lot of people and they knew a lot of

322 people. I didn't necessary know them because I didn't make it my business to be around people
323 that I didn't know or didn't feel like, "These are who I trust. These are who I mess with. These
324 are who I know." So, if you come around, if you come around enough I may know your face or
325 your name, but for the most part, I'm not really interested in you know, having this conglomerate
326 of people you know, to, to know. So, I actually never figured out who it was or what happened to
327 them.

328 D: At fourteen, you talk, you mentioned when you returned home to Milwaukee—

329 V: Mhmm.

330 D: —And your life became unstable. What kept you from getting involved in gun violence?

331 V: Actually, that made me more prone. So, part of the conversation while I wasn't in Milwaukee
332 was in preparation to return to Milwaukee, the things I was hearing. They talked about
333 Milwaukee like it was Chicago, or like it was like, like this warzone where you can't walk down
334 no block without getting shot and all this kind of stuff. And mind you I'm a, from four to
335 fourteen I'm going to private Catholic schools, I got like, I get allowance, like (laughter) so in
336 my mind. I was petrified like, "You sending me back there?" But one of the things that, like I
337 dealt with bullying a lot down there. And it wasn't terrible, it was more of I was different, I was
338 a city, city boy. I spoke proper to them, you know what I'm saying? I was light-skinned. You
339 know what I'm saying? So, compared to, to the rest of my peers. So, they like picked on me, they
340 jumped me all the time and like, and so, I had to become a good fighter you know what I'm
341 saying? I end, I actually ended up becoming a real, real good fighter and I didn't know that
342 before I got here because I was always getting jumped. But (laughter) but I usually came out
343 with not, you know, not too many scratches or whatever. So, I knew how to maneuver, I knew
344 how to handle myself. But coming up here, I mentally prepared myself like, "Okay, like, I'm not

345 going to allow myself to be victimized. I have to turn my savage up to match whatever,” you
346 know what I’m saying, “is going on out there, so I survive.” That’s literally what my mindset
347 was. And so, when I initially first got here at fourteen, I only went to the corner store and I only
348 went to like, to play basketball at the park. And then like, getting a feel for like how the people
349 were and what was going on, it wasn’t as dangerous as people like, was making it seem to me.
350 But it was still a level of danger that I wasn’t used to. So, what, all I did was like (pause)
351 gradually kind of like, geek myself into like a, the, a toughness that I didn’t originally have. So,
352 what I mean about turn my savage up is one of the things I experienced is, another thing, one of
353 the things that I experienced in Mississippi with my uncle’s wife was she was very abusive to
354 me. And so, at thirteen, fourteen, I kind of, one of the last incidents we had where she, she hit
355 me. Like, it snapped into my mind, like it don’t matter who you are, if you try to cause me harm
356 then I have to protect myself. That was another element that added to, to what I’m talking about
357 now. So, now I have a mindset of, I don’t play with people. If I feel like you a threat to me then I
358 have to, I have to do something to you. You know what I’m saying? I have to protect myself, I
359 can’t allow you to, to do nothing to me. And so, for the most part I carry myself as a cool dude,
360 my attitude, I’m not like, even for who I am now with how, you know, how people hold me in
361 high regard or whatever, I’m a very humble person. If I, if I come on to any block, people not
362 really going to feel threatened by me or feel some kind of way because I don’t come like, “Yeah,
363 I’m so-and-so.” You know, I don’t, I don’t carry myself like that, I’m very humble. I’m very
364 respectful. And that kind of resonates with a lot of people regardless of where I go and so,
365 (pause) but coming here made it easier for me to get involved with like, gangs and like, stuff like
366 that ‘cause that’s stuff, like I said, I felt like I had to do to survive and to, to, to protect myself
367 which lead into me like, having guns and you know, doing all this other stuff. But, for the most

368 part, like even today, like I, if I could own a weapon, if I wasn't a felon and I could own, I
369 probably would have a lot of weapons, but I would never use them. You know what I'm saying?
370 Like, I'm not the type of person to shoot somebody, I would rather fight you. You know? And
371 that's why I stay out of a lot of the stuff 'cause people don't want to fight. (laughter) Like,
372 especially not nobody who good at fighting. So, but these conditions actually made, made it like,
373 well kind of make it easier for anybody to, to be a gun holder or to use a gun. Now, the reason
374 you would use one matters. 'Cause if you argue with somebody and then you come back and
375 shoot them, there's no way you can validate that.

376 D: Right.

377 V: But if somebody is threatening, like if, certain things how they work in the street, if you say,
378 "I'm going to kill you," or a threat like that or just if certain things go a certain way. Then it's
379 almost like automatic what you have to do. You know what I'm saying? And then, and that,
380 those rules and how things are structured just off the basis of survival, a lot of times put people in
381 positions that wouldn't otherwise, you know, be a reasonable explanation or reason to anybody
382 else.

383 D: Is there a way that through the community we can change the code or the code on the streets?

384 V: To do that at this point is, and this is why we like, are, we're so adamant about and, and this is
385 what I mean about disingenuous. When we started in Sherman Park people had no, they did not
386 care at all for the teenage population. But ever since then, it's been like the focus, but not really.
387 Like, it's like the new thing to do, the new thing to get funding for, the new thing to talk about.
388 "Teen, teens, teens. The, the, young people, youth." But that's never been people's focus. But
389 the, the worst thing is people my age, the people like twenty-five and up, the people that they
390 would look, look up to or, I mean the same thing with like, the start of the gangs, all the structure

391 was taken out. And now you got people just making up they own rules and doing whatever. So,
392 to, to do that, to change the, how things are working now, that would mean we would have to go
393 out and literally go after all the young people who are really, I mean, they did what I did. When I
394 first got out here, there wasn't like a OG or somebody that taught me anything, so I just got with
395 a group of people and literally we created our whole own thing. You know what I'm saying?
396 This, on my knuckle, this is a, a gang that I actually started. And it was me and my brother and it
397 was a bunch of guys and I was like one of the, probably the youngest person in, in the, in the
398 group, but I was like a leader.

399 D: Okay.

400 V: And the only reason why we didn't like, we wouldn't murdering people and doing all this
401 other stuff it's 'cause we had rules set amongst ourself, "This is stuff you can and can't do."

402 D: Okay.

403 V: And the only reason why those rules were made sense or were sensible is because of the
404 upbringing I got in Mississippi where I got to live a different life. I had morality. You know what
405 I'm saying? I knew right from wrong. I was you know, a lot of this stuff was just like, rules that,
406 that would be set for by any household that didn't have the problems that we had. So, it's less
407 instr-, it's just like basic stuff. You don't hit women. You don't victimize women. Like, we ain't
408 robbing no old ladies or no stuff like that. You don't bring attention to our block or police to our
409 block, you don't make it "hot" per se.

410 D: Okay.

411 V: We don't deal with nobody who mess with kids. You know what I'm saying? Like, it just,
412 simple rules like that. But now, it's like whatever. Like, now people are friends with whoever, it
413 don't matter what they did. If you did something to their guy, don't matter what they did, they

414 going to rival you. If my friend did something wrong, the reason why our gang didn't last long
415 'cause I beat everybody up. (laughter) You, you broke the rules fam. Like, we got to beat you up,
416 you know what I'm saying? And luckily for me, that didn't lead to me being killed, like for
417 whatever reason, don't matter how many people I beat up. Like, people always either like,
418 befriended me or had like, more respect.

419 D: Right.

420 V: They didn't like, really feel it to, retaliate against me.

421 D: Right.

422 V: So to say, so, I like, dodged a bullet that most people didn't dodge. But for the most part, it
423 just, it's, I literally saw the change to where like, now people are robbing women. Now people
424 are shooting and murdering and doing all the burning. Like, they, y'all just doing anything now.
425 You know what I'm saying? And it's, I don't understand it, even coming from a element of
426 crime, like, there always was rules. And now, it's just like anything goes. It's just like, do what
427 you feel, do whatever you want. And almost like you have to do the wildest stuff to, to, I don't
428 know, feel like you somebody or brag about, I don't know what it is. But clearly there has been
429 a, not a level of checking amongst each other to not do that kind of stuff. You know what I'm
430 saying? They just, so, I just feel like we need to at some point, I don't know how it could be
431 done, but if we just got all these people and had a conversation with them. Like, I know a couple
432 of us have always said like, "We need to go to the different hoods and just like, figure out who
433 are the movers and the, the shakers." People running, running things. "Who are the young people
434 who got they own little things going on?" We have to get everybody in a room, either if, if, all in
435 one room or one by one go around to everybody and like, get them to agree, like, this is how we
436 going to move as a city, as, you know what I'm saying. Most other major cities, most major

437 cities do that. They have like gang or group on group mediation or like a committee or like, I
438 done want to say committee, a round table of all they little you know, leaders or, or whatever.
439 And like, they, it's, if it's some beef or some drama they come, they sit down, they talk like,
440 "This is what we going to do. This is how we going to handle this." It's just, everything here's
441 just like, up in the air. It's like, whatever, you know.

442 D: What would you say to elected officials or community leaders?

443 V: The same thing as we say the police that do stuff that they shouldn't do, if this not the job for
444 you, don't take it. If you are taking these seats to you know, be this major person or make all this
445 money and you don't have the wellbeing of the people in the community at heart, you don't need
446 to be in that position because all you doing is, ca—you causing this stuff. And it's one thing to
447 understand that and really like, dive into how can we fix it, or even do both. If, if you are about
448 business you should also be about community, there should be a balance there. It shouldn't be
449 this much business and this much you care about the community, you know what I'm saying?
450 And so, my message to them would be to, to cooperate, to bring people to the table, to be, to
451 have people at these meetings, people that you know are, are impactful. It's one of the reasons
452 why I respect OVP because most, most of these organizations or these places wouldn't do what
453 they, what they did. Have that different set of group, people in that, in the room like that to all
454 put they heads together and they resources together and they platforms together, like, you know,
455 "We all kind of on the same level in here. Let's all attack this." And that's, that's a concept that
456 our mayor need to have, our alderpeople need to have. And not just who you want to work with,
457 you know what I'm saying?

458 D: Right.

459 V: Like, this buddy system stuff is killing us. It's killing us. You don't have to be friends with
460 somebody, and that's the crazy thing, they'll give a contract with somebody, these people came
461 down here, they had, bringing guns to the worksite, they got KKK and confederate flag. Y'all
462 give more contracts to these people who clearly don't like you, but you don't want to work with
463 me.

464 D: Right.

465 V: You know what I'm saying? Like, that, that's just, it's no excuse for that. And that, that's
466 what needs to change because until that is the level of leadership that you have, 'cause guess
467 what? All of the community activists and groups don't agree with each other, but if it's a vigil
468 going on, if a family is in need, guess what? Everybody is going to at some level work with each
469 other or attack that issue and get it done, regardless of who involved or whatever's going on. It's
470 like, the work, the work is what's important right now. And that's, I mean, we call down from
471 these seats to tell the community what we need to do and what our problems are, but kind of
472 need to do that up there amongst y'all selves first, you know.

473 D: Right.

474 V: 'Cause honestly, if (pause) if I didn't have the upbringing that I had, and I grew up in, in
475 Mississippi, I would probably look at like, our elected officials and say like, "Okay. They asking
476 us, like, these are the people who supposed to be highly respected and, and the right doers and all
477 this, but look what they doing out there." We got people stealing money, people who accused all
478 different kind of stuff, you know, those, the rumors go around, who messing with who and all
479 this, like, y'all kind of messed up too. You know what I'm saying? (laughter) And you really
480 telling me that I could be messed up and succeed. You know what I'm saying? I could, you
481 know, so it's, you not really encouraging people through, through your actions or through your

482 own like, living out what you talking about. And it's just, further, like I said it's a visual that
483 people, I mean, they take from it what they take from it. But they just need to do better, they
484 need to be more community-minded and focused.

485 D: Do you forgive the person who robbed you?

486 V: Yeah.

487 D: Okay.

488 V: I would hope everybody I robbed forgive me. (laughter) I sincerely do 'cause I feel bad. I
489 remember this one time we robbed this dude and we usually made, we tried to make it especially
490 not like, I don't want to rob people who like, look like me.

491 D: Right.

492 V: Or you know. You probably got, when I robbed a dude he had a bus ticket, a bus transfer in
493 his pocket. (laughter) I done gave it back to him. "Hold on son, my bad." (laughter) But I
494 remember we, we robbed this dude right. It had to be like, it had to, and this, this was [in Garden
495 Homes]. Now, remind you, our, our comm-, our neighborhood is like ten blocks the other way.

496 D: Right.

497 V: And some of our people they didn't have no mask on or nothing, but we just like, it's like four
498 or five of us, we walking around, we got these guns. And so, this dude was like, he, he clearly
499 had just went grocery shopping, he was taking his groceries in the house. So, we robbed him, we
500 took his car. And do you know, one of my friends was like, putting the groceries back in the car.
501 (laughter) Made me so, this dude was so bad. He was like, "Man, can I at least have my
502 groceries, God?" So, we drive off with the groceries my, and my brother was in the back seat
503 like, "Man, y'all bogus as hell taking—" And he eating the, the food while he telling us we
504 bogus for it. I'm like, "You eating it though!"

505 D: Did y'all take him back his food?

506 V: Nah. (inaudible) But, I mean, it was funny but we all felt bad for that. You know what I'm

507 saying? Like, we all knew we weren't supposed to be doing this stuff. We had sense, we had

508 morality, like, we know this stuff wrong. It was funny. But it just, I mean, jeez, we ain't got to

509 go, we already got a vehicle, so we can get from point A to point B. And now we ain't got to go

510 to no snacks run to get no, I mean, we was going to go steal food anyway. I guess to them

511 though, it was like a short cut.

512 D: So—

513 V: So.

514 D: And the reason why you say you did that was because you had, that was your only way to—

515 V: We was out and about. I, listen, I got family. My family mostly got multiple kids theyself,

516 bills, all this kind of stuff. Even if I did stay for them it never, stay with them, it never was for

517 long. Because I mean, it don't matter what you do. You can like, literally be in the corner in

518 somebody house and they going to say you owe some money for something. The electricity bill

519 done went up. You eating food, drinking water, I'm like, "Damn." You know?

520 D: Right. Right.

521 V: As a kid that's a lotta pressure to be under, like, you know. And so, for the most part, literally,

522 we was, I don't know, sleeping in cars.

523 D: No one came looking for you?

524 V: No. I popped up, even now, it's still the same thing. Like, even now. Like, it'd be months or

525 years in between when I go to my, like see my family or be at, pop up at they house. And that's

526 just like, from habit, from living like that. Like, it, it takes so, and literally it, it, it bothers me

527 because like, I'll look up and say, "Dang, I ain't call my grandma in like a year. I ain't call," you

528 know. And that's just how estranged our family is. And we, you know, we see each other and
529 speak on social media and stuff like that, but for the most part, physically, like, at least for me
530 because of how I came up and what I had to do, like, those habits are like, very, extremely hard
531 to break. I was one, secluded because of the burdenism like, you know, living with them and
532 then it would go bad and I'd get kicked out, whatever. But then the other part of it is, I kind of
533 seclude myself because I'm better that way. You know what I'm saying? I don't want to, you
534 know, whatever I'm doing or got going on, I don't like it affecting other people, or, or putting
535 other people in it so, like, I'm just a loner person. And, literally it bothers me to look up and
536 know it's been so much time passed since I had any type of real interaction with them or, or
537 whatever. So, yeah. That, you know, we was, I think I would like to think that a lot of the young
538 people or people period are like me. I know it's very, it's very few people on this Earth who
539 literally, I believe, are just so heartless and don't care. At some point, people care about what
540 they do, it's just like, you know, at the moment, in the moment and in the moment, it's just like,
541 they not thinking like I was when, when I was chasing that dude. Or they I mean, they've got it
542 in they've mind that it's just like, "I got to do whatever," you know what I'm saying. It, it don't
543 matter if I think it's right or wrong. You know what I'm saying? Just feel like I got to do what I
544 got to do. (laughter)

545 D: (laughter) Oh, man. (pause)

546 V: I would've never allowed nobody around me to shoot and kill nobody. That's something I
547 would never, I'm glad I had the upbringing that I did 'cause literally, I rule with a iron fist and I
548 was like I said, one of, if not the youngest person, one of the youngest people around. We was
549 telling dudes in they twenties what to do. (laughter) You know what I'm saying, we was treating
550 people in they twenties and they, like, they had a lotta respect for us. One, because we was great

551 fighters and two, because we thought we was thinking you know, people. We knew what we was
552 doing. We didn't just do random, crazy, ridiculous stuff. And, and that was the protection for
553 them. You know what I'm saying? And that saved us because even though we did B.S., most of
554 my friends, they moms like, loved, like loved me. At least, they, they didn't mind they, they boys
555 being around me because they was like, "At least we know y'all ain't going to be too wild or you
556 going to be the voice of reason," or you know what I'm saying? So, they welcomed me into they
557 house, they let me stay with them, they you know, even now like, when, when they see me out,
558 they remember me, they, you know. So, I was, I'm, I'm grateful for that. That things never
559 progressed past where I felt they needed to. Like, I never crossed certain lines.

560 D: Okay.

561 V: You know what I'm saying? So.

562 D: Did you lose any of your friends that, once you returned home, that you grew up with, to gun
563 violence?

564 V: Let me see, who got killed? (pause) I lost a lot of friends to gun violence. I've lost a lot of
565 friends to prison. I've lost a lot of friends to car wrecks and accidents. (pause) I think there's,
566 there's like a level of attachment and detachment. Like, even now in the community. Like, if
567 somebody dies, especially these young people, like, I'm usually the person that says, that, that
568 responds to that and that ends up, that ends up like, being befriended by the family and then I
569 have to like, deal with all they internal stuff and just the stuff with you know, whatever, whatever
570 the incident was. But, it, it, what makes me sad is I don't even have enough time to grieve most
571 of the time. Or to reflect on a lot of that because it's going to be another one tomorrow or another
572 one and it's like, I get mad because even thinking back, like I try to remember names. And it's
573 just so many, it's confusing. I either forget the names or I leave somebody out or it's just like,

574 it's overwhelming. When you look at like in Ashton, when we talk about these police shootings.
575 Like even them, it's like too many hashtags or names to even remember all the time and to me,
576 that's like the worst thing that I have to reflect on. It's just like, my main reflection is it's just too
577 many. You know what I'm saying? And for me, I think however my mind works, it either
578 (pause) filters out what it, you know, needs to remember or like, makes for, I don't know how to
579 describe it, but I honestly can't tell you how like, I, 'cause people don't understand like, you
580 didn't actually, this not your family member or it didn't happen to you, but when you deal with
581 these families in these situations that's, that, a trauma attaches itself to you every time, too. And
582 for me, it just bothers me that I can't, I felt like I should be, feel worse or I feel like I should like
583 cry at every vigil or whatever like I, and I, it, it pisses me off when I can't do that. You know
584 what I'm saying? But I've always been a person too, that has held everything in. That like, I
585 mean, life is life. I can't sit here and be sad about something and dwell on it so I think like,
586 things I set up as protections have also been like, have also been like I don't want to say
587 downfalls, but have affected me negatively too at the same time. So, it's both protect-protecting
588 me and hurting me. You know what I'm saying? And I think it's mostly showing up like, if you
589 saw me like a year or two ago, I didn't look like this. I had long dreadlocks, I was skinnier. You
590 know what I'm saying? And it's just like, now that I'm older it's like, manifesting in different
591 ways. Like, the stress of everything and it's just, and I can't really put my finger on it.

592 D: So, are you saying you know how to manage stress better or are you saying that you don't?

593 V: I actually don't know if I am. I don't know if I'm harming myself. One of, one of the things
594 that have, and the real reason that I say this is, I know it's going to affect me at some point
595 because even the stuff that I went through earlier in my life as a kid, as a teenager, a young adult,
596 I will always block it out or I will always keep moving forward. But it would be times like, I'm a

597 happy person. I don't like nobody being sad around me and all that kind of stuff. But it would be
598 like, just times I would be like, by myself or somewhere and like, depression is just hitting me
599 like, hard. Everything would hit me at one time. So, when people don't address they issues or
600 they feelings and a lot of times, they block it out. I just have these, these like, every couple years
601 or every you know, every so often, just these times where like, I would, everything would just hit
602 me at one time and I just be sad or depressed like for, maybe for a day at the longest. And then I
603 be, I be alright again. So, I don't, I need to figure out how, how my brain works or how I am
604 coping to where it, that don't happen.

605 D: Okay.

606 V: You know what I'm saying? And I think that's, I think that may be worse. 'Cause that, I don't
607 know if you ever seen people who never get sad or angry, but when they do it's like the worst
608 thing ever? I don't want to be one of them people.

609 D: Okay.

610 V: You know what I'm saying? And that's, that's kind of what I mean.

611 D: You don't want to accidentally harm yourself or something.

612 V: Yeah.

613 D: That's what you mean?

614 V: Well, I don't, I'm very conscious in thought. I think about things a lot, I compute things a lot.
615 So, I think like, even that moment, I think if I wouldn't've been able to, I probably would've
616 chased dude until bullet hit me. You know what I'm saying? But because at some point I was
617 able to regain control, or my mind was able to do it, whatever kind of way, I think that however
618 I'm wired it, before a line gets crossed it pops back in. You know what I'm saying? And I'm
619 grateful for whatever that is.

620 D: I am too. (laughter)

621 V: (laughter) But I just, it's something I don't fully understand about myself. And clearly, I'm a
622 person that tries to understand myself in a lot of, other people to the highest degree that I can, so.

623 D: Is there anything that you'd like to add?

624 V: (pause) I would, I, so, when I told you about the story about the Mississippi and then, and the
625 pat down and the guns, and I don't know if you feel like this, but I know a lot of people,
626 especially mothers who experience gun violence with their children or whatever a lotta times
627 they call like, for people to not have guns at all.

628 D: Okay.

629 V: I don't, I don't understand that. And I will, I would like to understand that because I get the
630 concept of if nobody has guns, then nobody will harm anybody, but I also know that there are
631 places on Earth that don't have guns, they totally banned guns. And people just get stabbed to
632 death. So, it's almost like, like when we deal with police and the first thing that people holler is,
633 "Training! Training! Training!" Like, I'm like, what are you talking about 'cause if you send a
634 racist person through a training, that's not going to stop they racist mindset. They actually may
635 get pissed off that you making them take this training. So, I think that like, the questions you
636 asking about focusing on why, why things happen, the conditions that allow or make things
637 happen. That's the focus. And 'cause I could, like, I think we have misplaced blame and anger
638 on things. Like, when it, it really bothers me when I hear people say Grand Theft Auto make
639 people steal cars. Like, people been stealing cars since they made cars. They actually used to
640 steal more cars when they first made them. People was stealing cars all the time. Like, it was like
641 (laughter) so, a game didn't make somebody do that. I played that game. It didn't make me want
642 to go steal a car. What made me want to go steal a car is, I'm tired of walking. And I would like

643 to look cool for a second. You know what I'm saying? Like, those are things that would put
644 somebody in a position to do that. Or, "I need money." So, I got this grown person telling me
645 they, they got this kind of car and they need the parts off another car exactly the same, so they
646 want me to go steal that kind of car. Like, these are actual things that are contributing factors to
647 the behavior. You know what I'm saying? So, when we don't address economics, when we don't
648 address mental health, when we don't address, like, the actual root causes of stuff, which is what
649 every program we have is based off of. That's why it's impactful. Because it's not really a
650 response of (pause) it's very focused on like, my own experiences of, "I know why this kid is
651 actin' like this. They bad." I'm not, like, I'm not focusing on saying, "This a badass kid." I'm
652 thinking why would they be doing that and then I relate that to like, me in that exact same
653 situation, "Okay, well, now I'm fixing to find out if that's why." And then you talk to them and
654 they tell you. These kids'll tell you what's wrong with them. You know what I'm saying? A lot
655 of the grown people, if you, if they feel comfortable enough they'll tell you what's wrong with
656 them. And a lot of times, we all do things for kind of the same reasons. It's the, the factors are
657 mostly the same, they may not be exactly the same, like if you got punched, you might've got
658 punched here or there, but you still got punched. So, that's something that we can both relate to.
659 And both point out as the common denominator of why you just hit this person, you know what
660 I'm saying, back or whatever it was. So, I think if we focus more on people and, and we're
661 genuine about it 'cause we talk about lead, we talk about mental health. Lead is a contributing
662 factor to people, one, the brain function and how they respond to violence. They actu-, it actually
663 makes them more prone to violence. So, we literally are not considering that we have ticking
664 time bombs walking, like we all been drinking this water or takin' showers in it or whatever. But
665 I can't believe that I did not take that into consideration when we was first dealing with all these

666 kids in the park. Now, we sitting here watching them and how they interact and the decision that
667 they making, but we also see like, this jump past the decision making, like you didn't even think
668 about when you did that. And we looking at each other like, "Damn they really, are they that
669 stupid or are they just not thinking?" And just having these conversation with them but not ever
670 even considering the lead. Like, the following year is when the lead talks start rising up. And
671 then I'm like, "Damn, that's why." You know what I'm saying? Seeing a, a teenage girl involved
672 in a fight that she ain't have nothing to do with and she got this big butcher knife. What are you
673 doing with this knife and what are you going to do with it? So, you know, my partner took it
674 from her and was talking to her and she like, she don't even understand why she got the knife or
675 why she was just ready to use it on this girl that she don't even know. And she ain't even have no
676 actual problem with. There's no thought process there. Why is there no thought process there?
677 And connecting that to you know, (pause) the other factors of the area. You know what I'm
678 saying? And contributing that to just a lack of not, just not thinking at all and being in the
679 moment and like, we just have to be more focused on and intentional on eliminating the factors
680 of why we end up having stuff like this.

681 D: Wow. Thank you. (laughter) (inaudible)