

R.E. Smith interviewed by Waqar Gill

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, happening, government, blm, protests, pandemic, wife, interview, self care routine, war, age, anti racist, steps, movement, anti war movement, life, explain, side, 10s, marched

00:01

Waqar Gill: Hi, I'm in our Smith's house in Queens and going to interview him. We both are in double mosque and sitting six feet apart. Now I'm going to read the agreement. This oral history project is being conducted by the Waqar, a student at Guttman Community College, City University of New York. By signing the form below, you have guaranteed permission for the audio recordings, notes, transcripts, video and photographs resulting from this interview to be gifted to a collection held at City University of New York without restrictions. If you have guaranteed permission to do so, the interview may become a part of an archive and the interviews will be made available for use consistent with City University of New York's mission regulated according to any restrictions placed on their use by you, or interviewer.

01:13

Robert Smith: I, Robert Smith, have read the above. The interviewer affirms that he has explained the nature and purpose of this oral interview. The interviewee, myself affirms that I consent to the interview. the interviewer and interviewee hereby give grant and assign all rights title and interest, including copyright of whatever kind. From this information and interview to Guttman Community College, City of New York with the with the following restrictions

01:52

WG: Before I begin recording, I remind you, you do not have to answer any questions they are not uncomfortable answering.

02:05

RS: I'm going to introduce myself and say a few things about me. My name is R.E. Smith. I'm 70 years old. I had a career in retail management. But I'm now retired. I am married. My wife is also retired. We

live in Queens. English is my first language and my family came to New York Well actually, I came to New York from the Midwest. I came to New York because I was young and I felt that I didn't want to live in the Midwest, I wanted something more exciting and it was a choice for me to come to New York and it proved to be a good choice.

02:56

WG: Now, let me ask something about you. In what ways was your family of origin politically active?

03:06

RS: Well, my family of origin were Democrats. They came from Eastern Europe. And they worked hard. They were union people, so very supportive of democratic politicians and ideas. I can almost assure myself they never voted for a single republican.

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WG: Why did you get involved in the anti-war movement during the Vietnam era?

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RS: Well, I was of age, It was in the very early 70s. I had already graduated from high school, and I was attending Ohio State University, then they had a draft. So I think the draft played a role in it because any of us young men could have been forced to go fight. And I think that pushes a more anti-war movement, rather than being lackadaisical when you can sign up and say, Hey, if somebody else can go fight, but whenever it's put in, you know, at your doorstep, that you may have to do it. And your mother and your father know that their son may have to go over and die. People view war differently. So I think that was part of it. Also, I did not understand why we were we were in Vietnam, why we were dropping bombs on innocent people. Most of us had never heard of Vietnam. And here we have a big war going on. 10s of 1000s of people were being killed on both sides on both sides, not just the American side. But the Vietnamese side, probably many more than 10s of thousands. So I couldn't in good conscience accept that.

05:08

WG: What exactly did you do as an anti-war individual?

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RS: Well, back then I marched in several anti-war marches. They were completely peaceful. There was no violence. It was just marching down High Street, on the Ohio State campus, there were probably 20 or 30,000. It's a long time ago, but I think there were a lot of 20 or 30,000 of us. And as we'd marched down the street, we had our slogans that we were all chanting. I don't remember any of those, but demanding that the US and the war. And I think it had some impact on the war being ended. Okay.

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WG: What was it about the Vietnam War that made you angry?

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RS: Well, I just told you, innocent people were being killed and I'm not sure what the government's aim was for launching this war against a country and sending Americans over to fight it. But there was just not a clear explanation of why this was happening. And it didn't make sense to me.

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WG: Between the Vietnam War, and the George fluid protests, what involvement, if any, did you have in the peace movement?

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RS: Well, let me say, I've been against every war since 2001. Wether are 2002, after the 911, World Trade Center, bombing. I was against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and I, again, showing those peace movements and marched in those peace movements. So we're talking this was 20 years ago, I was 20 years younger. I remember that now the government had figured out how to manage the anti-war protests, because there were speakers. But there were so many people there, this was in midtown Manhattan, they had actually kind of fenced in groups of people we were many, many blocks from the speakers, because they only let a very few number get near the speaker. So we were kind of just standing there on a street fenced in, couldn't hear anything. And it almost became redundant. What are we doing here? It was a very different peace movement from the 1970s. The government, I think, learned how to control these kinds of demonstrations, so they are less effective.

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WG: Do you think your earlier activism played a role in your current beliefs?

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RS: Certainly, I mean, we're a product of our history. So the family I grew up in and what I experienced, created who I am today, just like it does for everyone.

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WQ: No, I want to ask some question about COVID-19. How are you coping with the pandemic?

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RS: How am I coping with well? It's very difficult. It's very difficult. First of all, right now I'm in the double mask, and I hate masks. I hate the singular mask and I hit double mask. So I'm not doing terribly well. I can get agitated having to wear these masks. So because I don't like to wear we don't go out very much. My wife and I stay in quite a bit. It's safer inside. We're at an age that we are more vulnerable than young people. So it hasn't been easy. We've been isolated. We don't see our friends. We stay home

a lot. We depend on Amazon and food deliveries, restaurant deliveries. So it's been a change and it hasn't been I can't wait to go back to the old way.

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WQ: Do you have a self-care routine?

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RS: A self-care routine?

09:48

WQ: Yes.

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RS: I self-care routine? Yes, I do. Well, like I said, we stay in. And when we go out we're very careful. Initially when we went Now, when the pandemic started, we not we had a simple mask on, but we also were rubber gloves all the time disposable gloves. We were buying hand sanitizers; we probably have 10 bottles of hand sanitizer still here. So, so we created a self-care routine early on. And we have kept it. We don't wear rubber gloves when we go out anymore, but we've replaced the rubber gloves with the second double mask.

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WQ: What was your initial response to COVID? And how has it changed over time?

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RS: Well, I think I answered that I jumped ahead of you, maybe. But we were very concerned. It was nonstop coverage. Everyone was having press conferences with medical experts, and there was quite a dire situation. And I don't think at the beginning, if I remember correctly, anyone understood that it affected older people more. But it was, it was a historic time. If it had to happen, I'm kind of glad I got to experience it live through it. So it was a moment in time that hopefully this will be it'll never happen again.

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WQ: How, has the Coronavirus change your life?

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RS: It changed my life in many ways. We stay home a lot. We don't go out. We I think are not quite as healthy as we were before because we're less active. And that's not good. We understand that. But it's something that we have to do right now.

12:07

WQ: Have you or someone close to you gotten COVID?

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RS: No, no, no one close to me has gotten COVID.

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WQ: You lose anyone? Did you lose anyone close to you?

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RS: No, No, I didn't. Because of COVID?

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WQ: Could you tell me a little bit about them?

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RS: I didn't lose anyone. So there's nothing to say.

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WQ: What was it like to be home so far?

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RS: Well, again, I think I've answered this, but it's been difficult. we've adjusted. We like to travel, one of the things that my wife and I do a lot is traveling, and we haven't been able to do it. So I think that's been the hardest part. And also we like to walk to restaurants, we like a hot meal served to us in a restaurant. And for the first six, seven months, restaurants were closed. And we would have food delivered in but it's never hot and fresh. It's always, you know, feels like it was cooked an hour ago.

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WQ: How did it impact you socially, mentally and emotionally? Well,

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RS: Well, we've been isolated a lot. Psychologically, you know, I think I'm pretty strong psychologically. So I go with the flow of life. My wife does also. So in socially, as I said, we're kind of isolated right now.

14:03

WQ: How did it impact your family?

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RS: Well, some of my family has been because has become very paranoid about it. And they're, they live with great anxiety about it. And they are spraying the bottoms of their shoes if they go out with Lysol. I mean, it's gotten to the point to where there's there Is no pleasure in their life anymore. My wife and I retain pleasure in our lives and we have pleasure where we can and we were not wracked with anxiety over it.

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WQ: I have people in your household working?

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RS: Now. Nobody is working?

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WQ: What have you learned about yourself and your family since the beginning Have this crisis, that we're strong.

15:03

RS: We're survivors, we go with the flow. And we're able to tolerate the intolerable.

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WQ: What has been the hardest part of this pandemic for you?

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RS: Wearing a mask! As I said before, I hate it. Right now I'm in a double mask in my own house. And I'm not happy about it. As the early breed,

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WQ: Has there been anything positive to come out of the pandemic for you?

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RS: know, I don't think anything positive has come out of it. I wish it didn't happen. And we could, you know, one of the things too, is you get once you're retired, you want to enjoy your life, and not be stuck at home. And that hasn't happened for us so far.

16:02

WQ: What's been your favorite thing to do in lockdown?

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RS: My favorite thing to do on lockdown. Go through takeout menus, where we can order from different restaurants and hope that it's good. We do go out sometimes we do go out sometimes we try to go out

everyday actually, for a short walk. We don't go as far as we would normally go. But we're not. We try not to be prisoners in our house. Because that's no way to live.

16:43

WQ: How has COVID-19 change how you think about the relationship between our health as individuals and our health as a society?

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RS: Well, we're part of each of us as part of society. And I think society has all behaved in a very similar fashion as we are right now. We're all concerned about our own personal health and the health of our family. And we don't want to go out and get something and bring it home. So I think I think what I'm doing nearly as much of society.

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WQ: How do you think the government handled the COVID crisis?

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RS: I think they handled it quite well. We have a vaccine that came out in record speed. I have no real complaints about how they handled it. I wish there was more science shared by the government. Some of the lockdown rules seem to be arbitrary. And I would like more science from them. But otherwise, I think I'm not complaining about it.

18:02

WQ: How would you grade the job the government did in rolling out the vaccine,

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RS: An A if in fact it is effective, and safe. And I guess Only time will tell. But if it is an A?

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WQ: Will you be getting the vaccine? Why or why not?

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RS: I already have the vaccine. My wife and I both got the vaccine. We have both of them.

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WQ: How are you feeling about the world reopening?

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RS: Can't wait. Can't wait for the world to reopen. I want to go jump in. So yes, I'm excited about it.

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WQ: What's the first thing you are going to do when you have your freedom from the pandemic,

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RS: To travel, to travel, I want to get on an airplane, get on a cruise ship, get on an Amtrak train, go to hotels and order room service and to enjoy the things that I guess you're supposed to be enjoying in retirement that we're not able to do right now.

19:13

WQ: How do you think the world will be changed when we come out of this pandemic?

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RS: I don't know. I think people many people will still be very cautious and afraid. So I think it'll be a slow unfolding of back to normal back to two years ago.

19:36

WQ: Now I'm going to switch the topic BLM protest. Do you remember where you were and what you thought when you when you first saw or heard about George Floyd murder?

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RS: Yes, I remember. I remember I thought to myself, here we go again.

20:00

WQ: Explain to me why you think these anti-racist protests erupted?

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RS: I think people are, you know, distrusting of government. Government takes two steps forward, and often one or two steps back and people get frustrated, and they begin to mistrust and anger, anger grows and builds.

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WQ: What are some of the reasons that you think protesting black Americans and their non black lawyers are angry about conditions in the United States?

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RS: I think you know, as I said a minute ago, we take three or four steps forward to in progress. And then inevitably, we take one or two steps back. And it upsets, rightfully upsets people, makes them angry, makes them distrustful, makes them feel hopeless. And I think we saw what happened, what happens when people feel that way.

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WQ: Do you believe there are issues with the criminal justice system in the United States that have helped flame these protests?

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RS: Well, I'm sure there are, I'm sure there are, I can't really say I can't really talk about it, because I don't know much about it. But for anyone in prison for low level drug offenses, I think it's a crime. That's a crime. Not the low level drug offense, but incarcerating them for that. And I think a lot of our prison system is based on that. And now that we're going into a private, privately owned prison system, there's a profit motive to incarcerating vast amounts of individuals.

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WQ: What are those issues?

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RS: I think which issues though, I think there's a profit motive going on. And it's, it's I think it keeps unemployment numbers down. So the government looks good. I think the government benefits from it. Ultimately, communities don't individuals don't. But governments and private industry does.

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WQ: When did you become aware of those issues?

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RS: I've known them for a long time, just like everyone else.

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WQ: Do you think the history of race and racism in the United States impacts the BLM movement?

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RS: Of course it does. Of course it does.

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WQ: In what ways?

23:09

RS: Well, America has had a long history of segregation and racism. And I think it's what we see happening today is the result of that. And when the government and society takes one or two steps back, people lose faith.

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WQ: How do you explain the persistence of racism in the United States generally, and New York City specifically?

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RS: I don't know. I haven't thought about that. But I'm gonna pass on that question, because I can't answer it intelligently. And I don't want to I don't want to answer it unintelligently.

24:07

WQ: Why do you think New York City became an epicenter of protests?

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RS: Well, an epicenter, it was an epicenter, it wasn't that epicenter. But I think we have a large population here and we have a population that's once change. So I think a lot of different factors came into play. But it needed to happen. And I'm glad that happened in my town.

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WQ: How have the uprisings across the country shifted, how you think about your ethnic identity of your place in US society? Well,

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RS: Well, I have a very good self-image and I'm It hasn't shifted how I feel about myself, or my ethnic background, my family came over was not a picnic by any means it was not a walk in the park. They worked incredibly hard with enormous suffering. And, you know, each generation has outperformed the previous generation. And I hope that all cultures are able to do that. So I'm okay.

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WQ: Do you have any stories you are willing to share about encounters you have had with racism, or the police?

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RS: I've had no encounters with the police. I've had no encounters with the place really, outside of, you know, traffic ticket or to when I was quite young. But nothing that I have experienced.

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WQ: Are more stories among friends and family members being shared about racism. And the police since the protests started.

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RS: We're certainly there's a lot of discussion about it. And I wouldn't say it dominates conversation, but it's happening in society today. And it's not ignored in my social circles at all.

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WQ: Have you learned about an experience of someone close to you?

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WQ: No, I mean, my wife and I have certainly supported the peaceful protests. And we were in Manhattan during one of those coincidentally, and we stood on the sidelines and applauded as everyone walked by. So, yeah.

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WQ: Were you active in the protest at all in a digital or in person way over the last six months?

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WQ: Well, like I said, Before, we have been cheerleaders on the side, let's put it that way. cheerleaders on the side, we're not at of an age to and with COVID, to really do much more than cheerlead from the side.

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WQ: Why did you decide to get involved?

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RS: I mean, how could you not get involved? Well, we marginally got involved. We, you know, we watch the news. We get angry like everyone else.

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WQ: Do you have any stories or experiences about being involved in the protests that were impactful to you?

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RS: No, nothing more than I have said before.

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WQ: How has BLM shifted the culture?

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RS: How Oh, I think it's greatly shifted the culture to the to the left, and time will tell how far it goes left or whether it comes back to the right in any way. But yeah, we see major changes happening. Okay.

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WQ: How have the past few months change? how you think about the police and racism in the US?

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RS: My thoughts on police are positive. I think there are rogue police. I don't think as a whole, the police are bad. So they're very bad cops. They're very poorly trained cops. But as a whole, I can't condemn an entire industry of law enforcement. That I will condemn those individuals who acted in the way that we've seen over the years.

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WQ: What have you seen your peers doing that inspires you?

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RS: I think my social is of an age where we talk about it we cheerlead from the side I know of two people who have donated to causes that support the anti-racist movement.

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WQ: Why do you think there is so much backlash to BLM? favor? Why do you think there is so much backlash to BLM?

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RS: Or backlash to BLM?

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RS: I think people on both sides are frightened, too much change. So I don't really know because I don't talk to that many people who are part of the backlash to BLM. So I can't really answer that question intelligently.

31:00

WQ: Did you learn more about the history of racism in this country since the protests started?

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RS: I grew up in in the 60s. So I lived in witnessed a lot of it. So you know, I think it would be educational for someone your age. For someone my age who has lived through these, we've had a firsthand history lesson.

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WQ: How do you explain the looting and destruction of property that took place during the protests?

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RS: Well, I agree. I like peaceful protests, I engage in those throughout my life. I do not, I do not think anyone has the right to destroy property, whether it's government property or private property. So I draw the line there. I understand anger can cross the line. But I don't think I don't support looting and violence.

32:05

WQ: How do you explain folks who respond to BLM with all lives matter?

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RS: All lives matter? I don't know. I haven't thought about that. So I'm going to not answer that question. I'd have to think about it. I've never I don't know anyone personally, that's ever said all lives matter.

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WQ: How would you like to see this movement? resolved?

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RS: I think the movement should continue. And should I think education is a very important part of any movement. And it's, it's an exciting time, and that change is afoot. change is happening.

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WQ: Do you believe we are any closer than when George Floyd was murdered?

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RS: I think so. Absolutely.

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WQ: Is there anything else about the anti-racist uprisings you would like to share?

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RS: No, I think I've shared a lot.

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WQ: Now, I'm going to shift that topic to January six. What happened in Washington? What was going through your mind when you first heard US Capitol was invaded?

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RS: Well, this is an interesting turn of events in my life. And in my wife's life. 2020 was so terribly difficult and distressing, because of COVID because of the elections, because of so many things happening in 2020, that my wife and I decided, really, one of our new year's resolutions was we had to

step back from 24 hour news cycle, because it was affecting our health, our mental health and our physical health. My wife has blood pressure issues, and the 24 hour news cycle, we needed to take a breather from it. And so what happened on January 6? We were in our quote sabbatical at the time. And so I don't know a lot about what happened. I know what happened on January 6, but I didn't follow this closely as I have followed all the other issues through 2020. And I'm not the only one other friends in our social circle also had to take a step back, because it just became too onerous, too overwhelming to constantly be hearing about all of this all of these events that were happening.

35:07

WQ: What are your reactions to the invasion of the US Capitol by Trump's voters on January 6 2021?

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RS: Well, as I said before, I don't think anyone has the right to invade, destroy buildings, public or private on either side. So I do not condone, I do not condone it at all.

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WQ: What do you think, led these people to attempt to violently overthrow the government?

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RS: I think there was a lot of mistrust and distrust about the election results.

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WQ: Were you surprised how they were treated by the police?

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RS: I don't know. Because I wasn't following it that close. So I know. One of them was killed by the police. A young woman. Beyond that, I don't know. I don't know.

36:13

WQ: What do you think about the impeachment trial of former President Trump? No,

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RS: it's interesting. We watched it. Of course, this was all happening in 2020. And I was waiting for the bombshell information to impeach him and I didn't hear it. So you know, it's Washington, DC politics plays a role in absolutely everything on both sides. And I'm at an age that I understand that very clearly. Both sides use. Politics plays a very major role in everything that happens in Washington. And politics is about power, in my opinion.

37:03

WQ: How do you explain the lack of hostility between the two political parties?

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RS: Well, I think they've there's always been a hostility, but I think it's heightened now. I think it's heightened. And I think the election of Donald Trump heightened a lot of feelings on both sides. He was not a career politician, and he came in and scared a lot of people.

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WQ: This is the last question. If Trump was a woman, or non-white, how would the impeachment trial have been the same or different?

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RS: I think it would have been the same. I don't know. I haven't thought about that. So I can't really he didn't get an easy ride for those four years. From the left, they were after him. And he managed to stay, I guess, one foot ahead of them. But other than that, I don't know.

38:20

WQ: Thank you so much, Mr. Smith, to taking the time for this interview.

RS: Thank you.