Courage My Friends Podcast Series IX – Episode 7
December 10th Human Rights Day Panel Discussion:
The Ongoing Struggle for Rights in Canada

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ANNOUNCER: You're listening to *Needs No Introduction*.
Needs No Introduction is a rabble podcast network show that serves up a series of speeches, interviews and lectures from the finest minds of our time

RESH: Seventy-seven years after the global adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, what is the meaning of human rights? At this time of polycrisis and genocide, can we still have faith in human rights principles and its instruments? And what does and must effective rights-based organizing look like in Canada today?

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COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: Welcome back to this podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute at George Brown College.

In the words of the great Tommy Douglas...

TOMMY (Actor): Courage my friends, 'tis not too late to build a better world

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: This is the Courage My Friends Podcast.

RESH: Welcome to episode 7: *December 10th Human Rights Day Panel Discussion: The Ongoing Struggle for Rights in Canada*

I'm your host Resh Budhu

For this season's final episode, we bring you a special December 10th Human Rights Day panel discussion, the first of a series of events celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Community Worker Program at Toronto's George Brown College.

Community workers and human rights advocates. Brianna Olson Pitawanakwat, Samira Mohyeddin. Diana Gallego, Desmond Cole and Diana Chan McNally discussed the meaning of human rights in Canada 77 years after the UN adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, critical issues facing us today and the power of solidarity-driven rights-based organizing.

We begin with an introduction and land acknowledgement by Community Worker Program faculty, John Caffrey.

JOHN: Welcome everybody. Thanks for being here. My name is John Caffery and I'm one of the professors in the Community Worker Program. I'm also alumni. So thank you for joining us for the first in a series of events to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Community Worker Program.

And we're gathered here on this very important day, the International Day of Human Rights. And we're gathered here on the traditional lands of the Haudenosaunee, Anishnawbee, Huron Wendat, and Mississaugas of the New Credit . Home to many nations now, which include the Inuit and Metis. And the land has been the site of human activity for over 15,000 years, long before the nation of Canada was established.

It is critical that we recognize Indigenous people as stewards of the land in the past, present, and future. And this is Dish with One Spoon Territory. This is Toronto Purchase Territory, Treaty 13.

And, you know, these land acknowledgements are meant to be a gesture towards action. Just last week, the Chiefs of Ontario made a call for urgent implementation of 2021 water settlement and legislation as a third of Ontario First Nations face drinking water advisories.

So I urge you to act and follow up from this acknowledgement and put pressure so that everybody can benefit from clean water. Thank you.

RESH: Good evening everyone I'm Resh Budhu faculty in the Community Worker Program Coordinator of the Tommy Institute of Labour and Social Justice here at George Brown College and host of the Courage My Friends podcast on rabble.ca. And I'm very pleased to moderate this evening's Human Rights Day discussion.

Today marks the 77th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations. And the global recognition that human rights, grounded in the principle of human dignity, are the protected birthright of every person on the planet.

Now that was in 1948. The majority of the world was still in the clutches of colonialism. The residential school system in Canada was still going strong. It was the year of the Nakba and three years after the end of World War II. The premise and promise of human rights were as much a challenge then as it seems to be now and this is the subject of this evening's discussion led by our incredible panel of human rights advocates and champions.

Brianna Olson Pitawanawkat, who is Anishinnaabekwe Indigiqueer and member of the WIikwemekoong Unceded First Nation. Brianna, currently co-leads Toronto Indigenous Harm Reduction and Native Art Society, both 2spirit queer and trans-led initiatives. Brianna, welcome

Samira Mohyeddin is a multi award-winning journalist and documentary filmmaker. She was a producer and host at CBC Radio and CBC podcasts until her resignation in 2023 when she founded On the Line Media with a focus on critical and contextual journalism. Samira is currently producing a documentary about the Palestine Solidarity Student Encampment at the University of Toronto. So welcome to you Samira.

And Diana Gallego, is both a graduate and former faculty with the Community Worker Program. She is Co-Executive Director of the FCJ Refugee Center and is President of the Canadian Council for Refugees. So welcome back Diana.

And Desmond Cole, is a journalist, radio host and activist. His debut book, *The Skin We're In: a Year of Black Resistance and Power*, became a national bestseller in 2020. Desmond is currently a journalist and podcast host with The Breach. He is also an old friend of the program. So welcome back Desmond.

And the community worker program is very good at graduating fabulous Diana's and Diana's. So we have Diana Chan McNally, who is also a graduate and former faculty with the Community Worker Program. She is the founder and Coordinator of the Ontario Coalition for the Rights of Homeless People and works with human rights organizations, the Shift and Maytree. Diana, welcome back.

Well, obviously you know the theme is Human Rights Day. And I think we'll start with you Brianna. So what does this day and more broadly, the principle of human rights mean to you, and how does it connect to your area of advocacy or activism?

BRIANNA: Ani.....

So, hello everyone. Thank you so much for being here tonight. And it's a beautiful day, despite the sleet.

I wanted to draw this back to something contextual in terms of human rights, that is personal to me. So in 2014, it was the year that the Operation Protective Edge happened in Occupied Palestine. The assaults very similar to what's happening today. It was also the year that I won a Human Rights Award in Amiskwaciy-wâskahikan, otherwise known as Edmonton, Alberta. And at that time, I won that Human Rights Award, as a activist in the community. Very young Indigenous person who had organized a boycott against Oxford Properties, which is a massive realty company all across the country, who had one of their malls where an Indigenous Elder was actually racially profiled and criminalized and banned. And it was just absolutely so blatantly racist.

And what surprised me, was not that it happened. What surprised me was the reaction that I received for speaking out and organizing around that incident.

On one hand I won this human rights award, but on the other hand, it was the first time that I'd actually been doxed online.

So I was put up on white supremacist platforms. I was put onto US websites that you actually have no jurisdiction in Canada to address. So I couldn't do anything about my information there. They took images of my family members, some of whom were in hijab. And the dialogue around that doxing was very Islamophobic and also anti-Indigenous.

And it was interesting because I think that was the first time that I really saw the confluence of those forms of hatred in one space. And it was also the first time that I really started to question human rights.

And when I went and accepted that award, I went up and I told the story of my MIshomis, who was a man who lived through the Indian Act and who never went to residential school. He managed to hide and didn't get taken away to Spanish Residential School in the North Shore of Lake Huron.

But there was a story that my mom had about how my Nokomis was writing a letter for him because he didn't know how to write English, barely could speak English as well. And my mom asked her, what are you writing? And she said, I'm writing a letter to the Indian Agent so that we can get permission to cut a tree down in the backyard so that we can light a fire to warm the house for the kids.

So that's a story that is not that far removed. And when we look at the nature of the Indian Act today, systemic disempowerment that existed then, permeates every facet of Indigenous life in this country today.

And we live in a country that was founded on the principles of genocide, which happened here to Indigenous people and a country that still continues to participate internationally in genocide, or at least not condemn it and be complicit in it. I question whether those human rights are something that is tangible.

And I just wanna finish by saying, a big wake up call was a couple of days ago when the UN passed the International Day Against Colonialism and Canada abstained. Because Canada is very much still rooted in this colonial mechanism and ideology here. And it, comes through and it seeps through in every facet of media, and a hundred percent still impacts our lives today.

So, in Anishnawbe culture, we don't rely also on the idea of rights. Rights are a European, you know, construct. We rely on the idea of responsibility. And I can say that if we relied on human rights, we would be in a dismal place, which is where we are today.

Indigenous people face some of the worst human rights abuses in this country, even internationally. Yet, if we all took the responsibility to stand up and advocate for everyone to have what they deserve and have what they need to live, then we would be in a very different situation. Nahaaw Miigwech.

RESH: Thank you, Brianna. And, Samira. What does the principle of human rights mean you?

SAMIRA: You know, it's a complicated question because my relationship to the idea of human rights, the universality of it has really changed over the years. So I immigrated to this country at the age of four from Iran. My parents specifically came here because of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. That was a big lure. But as I

get older and older, I see how unevenly it's applied. And then the ways in which human rights are weaponized against certain people, certain countries.

So it's a complicated question, and particularly in the last two years, it's become a bit meaningless for me, I'm sorry to say. I've become really aware at the duplicity of it. It's something that I'm actually quite reckoning with a lot, because I don't want to be so cynical of it, you know?

One of the reasons for that is I've been checking in a lot this year on the program that I have with Palestinian-Canadian lawyer who's an expert in international human rights law, Diana Buttu.

Another Diana.

And she said something to me that has really stayed with me over the past, two years, and that is that she refuses to allow Israel to take this from her also. Because it's taken so much from her throughout her life that she refuses to relinquish international human rights.

When we think about the fact that this whole idea of human rights and the United Nations and everything was born out of the dust of the Second World War and the Holocaust. And it's really gross to see the very nation that this was created or the very people or situation or tragedy that this was created out of, then malign it in the way that it has. It is really something that I'm, I'm still trying to grapple with.

RESH: Thank you and I, certainly, you're not the only one, this disenchantment and disillusionment with human rights, given everything that we're seeing now. Deanna, what does it mean to you?

DIANA G.: Thank you. It's really nice to be back here at George Brown and see some professors that were part of my journey here. I want also to say that I'm now the past President of the Canadian Council for Refugees. I was for two years and I just ended this past November.

For me this day is really important because even though sometimes I'm losing hope and losing why we should keep fighting and talking about human rights. I know that many people in this moment are dying and are being imprisoned, are being tortured and disappear because raising their voice. And being the front line and giving the voice that those that cannot speak out.

I was a lawyer, a trained lawyer, and a human right lawyer in my country, and because of that, I had to seek refugee protection in Canada.

I'm from Colombia, and in 2002 I was forced to flee my country because the work that I was doing and the work that my husband was doing. And for many years I silenced myself because that was the way to survive living in exile.

But one day I told myself, this is enough. You need to speak up again. And I regained hope and I thought I was in a country where human rights were at the top strain in our constitution. But when I started studying here at George Brown, I learned all the past. The residential schools. How Canada prevented refugees coming into Canada and send them to death. How they prevented workers to bring families.

Then I found out in Canada also there is human right violations. Probably doesn't cause to lose your life here when you speak up. in our countries that's happening every day. But also have a cost. We hear what Brianna was saying, the cost of speaking up.

Myself I was put two years ago in a non-flight list. Every time I flight and the plane fly through United States, I had to ask or they had to ask permission for me to fly. And I don't know why. Probably because I is still speaking up and bringing the issues of refugees and migrants in Canada. And how this country is still abusing human rights. But being in the international scenarios, these super country that respect human rights, when in reality it's not like that.

RESH: Thank you Deanna. Desmond.

DESMOND: Thank you Resh. Thank you John. And everybody who made this possible. It's so nice to be here for really a cool anniversary as well. It's amazing that this program has had this run and is still obviously by everybody here going so strong. So congratulations.

Like everyone who's spoken already, I think that it's naturally many of us who are quite cynical about the idea of human rights, who are nevertheless called to think about it. Nevertheless engaging with it in our work. I think that that's probably as it needs to be.

I was just like doing a little bit of research for a podcast episode where we interviewed somebody about this recent agreement between the Federal Government and Alberta about trying to pave the way for new pipeline development in British Columbia, from Alberta to British Columbia to the Pacific Ocean. And how there's all this complex legal jurisdictional stuff going on between the federal government, Alberta, and then there are all these other people who have a tremendous stake in what happens to that land and they were not consulted with.

First Nations, were not consulted with. The government of BC was not consulted with. And they're not really interested in that proposal at all.

So we talk about Free, Prior and Informed Consent of Indigenous Peoples in Canada as being like a requirement, a legal requirement. But then we hear government officials go on TV and say: Well, they don't have a veto though. They can't just decide unilaterally as a nation that the pipeline doesn't go through and is canceled.

They wanna make it sound like it's a negotiation, but it's a negotiation that the Crown is always going to win.

If the Crown wants that project, they're gonna get it. And everybody's rights under law, UNDRIP, right. United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People, well, somehow you can bypass that so-called law. You can ignore it when it's not convenient anymore.

The land doesn't have rights. Does the water have rights? Do the animals have rights? No, they're not even recognized legally under the law.

As I cover this conversation, you know, The Breach where I work now, we do a lot of federal government work. And this is new for me because I've spent most of my time as a journalist talking about Toronto and covering a lot of local things.

There is so little meaningful conversation, for example, about why there is a tanker ban in northern British Columbia. Why did people fight so hard to not allow oil tankers to go through this very narrow passage of land in an ecologically, I don't know what isn't an ecologically sensitive area. But you know, when oil spills in the north, in the ocean, do we even have the resources to clean it up?

It's not good if it happens in Vancouver, but we barely have the resources for something as catastrophic and sensitive as one spill in a place like that. It will destroy the environment in ways that we can't understand for decades to come. Just the development of these kinds of like mega carbon projects disrupts so much of the land, disrupts animals.

But we're not talking about that, we're talking about our country like it's a business deal, it's a transaction. And all of these rights, this notion of rights, really can be kicked aside.

You know, you get profiled on the streets of Toronto and you get violated by the police, and you get your possessions stolen by the police. And if you're lucky, and you can somehow get this into a courtroom five or six years, or 10 years later down the road - a civil courtroom, by the way, not a criminal one - maybe a judge will tell you that, oh, your human rights were violated.

Okay, and now what happens? Who helps you? Who supports you? Who makes good what was done to you? There's no legal requirement for that either.

I think Brie established correctly that we have a set of responsibilities that guide us. We have this tradition, Western tradition of human rights that it's here, so we kind of have to deal with it whether we like it or not. We all recognize it's imperfections, right?

But yeah, it's an irony I think sometimes how those of us who are the most critical of the limitation of a human rights framework are nevertheless out here struggling in

those venues because those are the ones that are available to us right now, in part, to do this work.

RESH: Absolutely. Thank you Desmond. And Diana.

DIANA M.: I imagine like many of you as students of this program, you probably first read the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in class. That's what I did. And for me it actually sparked a really important kind of drive where I think of the Charter and I think of human rights not as a solution, but as a framework. And the problem is our understanding, our interpretation and our application of that framework to speak to responsibilities.

We have governments that feel that they're not responsible to human rights. And they look at bylaws, which are the least powerful laws in Toronto, in this municipality. And they think that they supersede the Charter. They think that they supersede international human rights frameworks and they don't.

So if we look at how governments think about human rights, it is their understanding and interpretation and application which is lacking. They don't understand what our rights are.

And so when I'm working with homeless people, I'm constantly in this negotiation, with governments on the topic of homeless people's human rights, and they don't get it. They really don't get it.

We have bylaws in the city that criminalize you living outside in a park. You can't be tenting overnight. That is part of the municipal bylaw. We have provincial legislation that says that if you're living in an encampment, you can go to jail for six months or be fined $10,000 or both, simply because you have nowhere else to live.

We are criminalizing poverty instead of, again, looking at what the Charter says, what the National Housing Strategy Act says, and it says that housing essentially is a human right. Well, okay, the Charter doesn't do that, but the National Housing Strategy Act does. And again, so do international covenants that Canada has actually signed onto.

So I think one thing that I can say about trying to uphold people's human rights who are without homes, is that I'm trying to educate governments and people on what that actually means.

I am trying to educate them on the difference between negative rights and positive rights. And if you know the difference, negative rights are essentially preventing anyone from infringing on you. Positive rights are an application of resources so that we can get you closer to the realization of those rights.

When it comes to homelessness, we are extremely poor at recognizing positive rights. The best that we'll do is say, okay, you have a right maybe to continue living

in this parking lot, but we're not gonna give you any other resources to actually realize your right to housing. So I don't wanna throw away the framework. I think it could still have utility, but it is a extreme, extreme uphill battle to try and get people to recognize what that framework actually means. How it can be applied, and how it can be used to actually fulfill people's rights.

So, I have a lot of cynicism about it too for that reason. Because it's just constantly me saying the same things again and again and again about homelessness to every person, that I possibly can, to every politician repeatedly. I'm on the Housing Rights Advisory Committee at the City of Toronto. And I'm constantly having these conversations with people that I think should know better.

And even one of our local Councillors, Councillor Perks, I had to explain to him what positive rights were because he thought that it meant that you just have to give everyone a house. That's not actually what it entails.

RESH: It would be nice.

DIANA M.: It would be nice, like ideally it would be nice, but it's creating the conditions for everyone to have a home. And so just that nuance even is very, very poorly understood.

So I would say my job is constantly as an educator. about how we can take this framework and make it useful to ensure equity and inclusion for everybody. But at the same time, we are doing a really fucking terrible job of doing that. Sorry for swearing. But it's true. It's true.

And I want to recognize how poorly that we're doing. But at the same time, personally I wanna caution against throwing away human rights, abandoning them wholesale. Because at this moment I don't think we have a better framework. I don't. If something comes along, I will support that, but in this moment, I don't know that we do.

So I will continue to fight for human rights. I'll continue to educate arouind them. But I also will feel that cynicism of how poorly, how poorly we are doing in actually achieveing them.

RESH: Thank you. The issues that you're all talking about, they're not new. Housing insecurity, policing, immigration, refugees, the rights of Indigenous Peoples, our international obligations and complicity. This has been going on for decades, in some cases for longer than decades, for centuries.

We also have, right now a new government, a new budget. I can already see the shivers going through the panel. A whole thwhack of new policies that are coming in and that have galvanized civil liberties groups and human rights groups to mobilize.

You all have worked together in some way. You know of each other. You know each other, which is no surprise because where human rights are indivisible, all areas of human rights activism also intersect. None exist in a silo. But despite this, what is a major human rights, concern or priority for you right now that we really need to keep our eyes and actions on?

DIANA G.: I'm going to start quoting the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, Tomoya Obakata. Who in his final report in 2024, he visit Canada in 2023 and met with temporary foreign workers and organizations that work with them, concluded that the Temporary Foreign Workers Program, low wage and agricultural streams, constitute a breeding ground for contemporary forms of slavery. This is due to the closed work permit.

This is an issue that at FCJ my organization, sees every day. Among us, there are people that come to this country, tie to an employer for two years, and they have to spend their time in Canada in horrible conditions. And they are not free to move anywhere.

Those are the ones that pick up the tomatoes that we consume today. Those are the ones that clean the hotels where we spend our holidays. We don't see them.

And what the government did after the report, they were, this is not Canada, this is not happening here. Not only denying that, but there were indignation. No, you are ? with our international reputation. But what was the solution then? Reduce the Temporary Foreign Workers Program, instead of saying, yes, you should come here to work because we need this labour, but with dignity and free to move, not to tie to anyone.

Also closing the door for refugees that are coming to our country. These are the human right issues that I see close to my work in Canada. But there is a lot of work to do and fortunately, many, many workers are speaking up and denouncing these abuses. And we need to continue doing it. There is a lot of work to do, but we need to have them present and in our minds and speak up for that abuses that they are experiencing every day.

DESMOND: I guess of the many things that I could think about in this context, just over a decade ago, we had a federal government that was saying we want to make a so-called Cultural and Barbaric Practices Act hotline. So that if you're worried if your Muslim neighbor is, I don't know. There have been so many tactics to fearmonger. So the Harper government said, we're gonna create a Cultural and Barbaric Practices snitch line. Then they said, if you wear the niqab, you're not allowed to participate in a citizenship ceremony in Canada. You can't become a Canadian citizen. And they singled out this one group of people.

And Deanna talked about the no-fly lists that have been used more and more in Canada recently. The so-called security certificates where people, mainly of Muslim faith, again, are just disappeared without evidence and taken into secret trials and secret proceedings in this country for being accused without evidence of terrorism.

Now in Quebec, you can't wear a religious symbol to work in the public service and they want to even take away people's right to pray in public.

Yeah. Looking at a society that says it prides itself on human rights and lectures the rest of the world, right when we're doing these things. And it's interesting because every successive administration seems aligned on this set of issues.

They don't agree on everything, but they definitely agree about things like the need to control people's religious and political expression. And we're seeing it more and more and more. That's something that is deeply concerning to me.

DIANA M.: We have just an absolute crisis of homelessness in this province. Last year, 81,000 people were homeless in Ontario,that we know of. That we know of. And this is largely wrought because of terrible policy at the provincial level, but also at the federal level and also at the level of municipalities.

What this is, essentially is a complete abandonment of people. And every time you see an encampment, that is someone exercising their right to housing by literally making their own tent.

We have downloaded the responsibility directly on homeless people to ensure their own rights. And criminalizing even that action of survival, of pitching a tent in a park because you cannot afford anywhere to live, because no one cares, because you're criminalized, because you're put in jail, because you're ticketed, 'cause you're hated by everyone who is wealthy and in a house in your surrounding area. It's ludicrous, ludicrous to me.

And that we accept homelessness not just in this city, but across this province, across this country, and anywhere in the world disgusts me at such a basic level. Because it is to me just the foremost abandonment of people. Honestly.

Housing, homelessness, this is the space that I work in, generally speaking. This is where I put my energy. It's not a competition of whose rights are the most violated. It absolutely is not. But this is where my focus is. And I recognize that everyone here has a focus on a particular human rights abuse and abandonment by all levels of government and even just society's goodwill.

SAMIRA: I've been really focused on the criminalization of people in Canada who've been speaking out against Israel's genocide. Specifically looking at how it's manifesting itself in our school boards and in the bylaws that we're seeing changed in our municipalities just in order to stop people from protesting against the genocide.

That's what I've really been focusing on. Specifically how Palestinian-Canadians are being censored and silenced while their families are being slaughtered back home.

A lot of this is done in a very minutiae type of way. I don't think a lot of people understand what is happening on our school boards. And the Zionist organizations in

Canada that are weaponizing using lawfare, all of these things to get people fired. I have spoken with dozens of people on my show who merely just for saying "ceasefire" or "stop killing children", have lost their jobs, have lost their livelihoods, have been doxed.

It's really fascinating to me how everyone - I mean, I'm generalizing - but we're all just sort of going along with this. You know bylaws have been changed in order to prevent people from being able to protest as stolen land is being sold in synagogues in our city.

Then Canada has this idea of itself, as Desmond was saying, you know, lecturing other countries about human rights. When on the one hand we sit and we say, oh, we're gonna recognize the State of Palestine, and then on the other we're still arming the very State that is destroying Palestine.

So it's this duplicity that I've really been focusing on.

BRIANNA: I am going to talk about the war on drugs. The war on drugs is something that is as old as time. But here, right here in this country, the very roots of prohibition go back to the Indian Act That was the first legislation that was passed in this country that criminalized people from using substances and Indigenous people today remain, some of the people most criminalized and suffering the most from premature death, from the impact of those laws and the criminalization and moving away from this as a health issue.

So we started an initiative called Toronto Indigenous Harm Reduction. And it was started in 2020 because during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a massive, massive uptick of overdose deaths in the country.

Since that time, it was during the very first month of the pandemic that I lost a cousin to overdose. Since then, I've lost four family members, four immediate family members to overdose and two to the impacts of alcoholism. So that's six of my family members. And this is something we deal with day in, day out.

And what is happening right now. It was really interesting because I, I got to connect with Diana yesterday, where we, I deputed at a executive council session where we are advocating for encampments to have like an extra layer of accountability because essentially what's happening now is that everything is being addressed by policing. Everything is being policed, everything's being criminalized.

Homelessness is criminalized. Drug use is criminalized. So really, I came in and I spoke about how the impacts of these aggressive war on drugs measures, which are a addressed like solely by policing are actually driving Indigenous people from our land. And they're actually increasing the rates of overdose within our communities. Because they're not dealing with the root of the issues which is that we have a tainted drug supply and that people are using drugs and dying.

People have used drugs for many, many, many generations. It is a fabric of society that people do not talk about, but is very common, very normalized. And we have a province right now who are in the middle of a toxic drug poisoning epidemic where someone dies every 2.5 hours in this province.

2.5 hours.

And what do we do? We further criminalize and address that crisis with policing rather than health, which is what any health expert, if you ever look into drug policy in this country. We have a partnership with St. Mike's Hospital, with the Center for Drug Policy Evaluation. There is thousands and thousands of studies that have pointed to this being addressed by health measures. And that what is happening is that it is being criminalized.

And then on the other hand, we have a province that is just flooding our society with alcohol. And so we see this like complete disparity between the two, when in reality it's all substances.

We see this all the way down to the Indigenous person who uses drugs. Who faces, I would say the most stigma in society. Trans women, trans Indigenous, or Black women who use drugs, I would say face the most stigma in society.

And as Diana said it, I won't mince words, they are absolutely hated.

They are used as tools for political gain. Their rights are taken away. They're brutalized by police. Even the Toronto police would admit they have studies that they've done themselves to show that Indigenous people use drugs, are the most violated. All the way down from that to what we see today as the US manufacturing a war on Venezuela around the war on drugs.

So this permeates every facet of our culture. And what I would say is that we have to look at our health as Indigenous people as requiring the same kind of Free, Prior, Informed Consent as resource extraction and environmental degradation on our lands.

And people often don't see that. And all of these bills that are being passed. So Bill-223, that took away safe consumption sites, which Indigenous people are the people that mostly use those sites that save lives. That bill took away those sites.

Bill-6 which criminalizes people who are outside and using drugs who are homeless and using drugs, disproportionately impacts Indigenous people.

Eighty-seven percent of the Indigenous people in the city live in poverty. Eighty-seven percent. Are we homeowners in Toronto? No, we're not.

So that these bills are a form of attack on our communities. That they're attacking the most vulnerable people in our communities. And that they're doing so to chip away at

the Indigenous lived experience in this country. Chipping away at our families, at our kinship systems, at our cultural ceremonies, so that we are in a state of constant trauma and devastation over this crisis.

Because I can tell you there's not one Indigenous family in this country who's not been impacted by the toxic drup supply and the crisis that we're under right now. So that they can do things like Desmond is talking about. Ram through projects. Because we're so busy focusing on all of these issues that we can't deal with it all. But we are expected to deal with it all. We are expected to be experts on every single thing in our community.

And I think one of the last things that I'll finish with is that this is all connected. Toronto Indigenous Harm Reduction has been one of the only groups that has been able to like very, very openly speak about our solidarity with Palestine.

We were one of the drivers for the Palestine AFN, Assembly of First Nations Affirmation for Palestinian Solidarity Motion that went through in the spring. And that when this bubble zone bylaw came into effect, you would think, oh, this isn't going to impact Indigenous people. It's just about protesting. It's about curbing the protests that are just bugging everybody in Toronto, scaring everybody. And what happened is that Bill-5 was pushed through. Bill-5 was the assault on the ... it's the opening up of the Ring of Fire in Northern Ontario, resource extraction, mowing over Indigenous Peoples' rights and sovereignty.

So there was a rally for Bill-5. And some of the first people in Toronto who were brutallly... absolutely had the shit beat out of them by the Toronto police, were Indigenous people at the front of that protest for the bubble zone bylaw.

So to say that this is not connected is a misnomer. It is absolutely connected. And we see that connection. And we have never shied away from speaking about it.

We talk about drug user liberation. We talk about people having the ability to live and use substances in a way that they don't die. And to have it be a public health crisis and named for what it is.

So you're more than welcome to visit our Instagram. Super fun, lots of stuff on there. I could speak all day about this and I think that it's really important that we start to break down the stigma because we are in an absolute epidemic right now. And it is not getting any better. It's actually getting way worse and very entwined with the work that Diana does as well. So Miigwech.

RESH: Thanks Brianna. And thanks to all of you. And also you gave sort of a segue into the next, question.

It feels like in so many ways, so many people are living in a state of emergency. In terms of what you're talking, in terms of the hunger crisis, the housing crisis, we're in

a time of polycrisis we can't forget the climate crisis as well, which is the big thing and somehow has been moved to the back of the news cycle.

And we're also seeing corporate-driven inequality, genocide, our complicity with genocide and a really belligerent, unapologetic, in some cases, fascist politics that seems to be able to just do whatever it wants, regardless of the moral implications, the human rights implications and whatnot.

And it can be dispiriting, but at the same time, what we are seeing is a growing solidarity, incredible protests. Talk about effective organizing at this time. What are examples of effective organizing that you're seeing in this time of polycrisis?

And I'll open it to any one of you who wants to speak to that.

BRIANNA: I think just like being open to coming out of your own movement per se, and like seeing where the intersections lie and being really open to establishing relationships and solidarity around that. And that there is a lot of strength in that. You know, I think that oftentimes the larger forces at work attempt to pit us against each other on purpose so that they can divide and create this in-fighting. And a perfect example is Indigenous communities and issues around immigrant and refugee rights.

There's this stereotype that Indigenous people, it's like, well, why don't you give to the Indigenous people first? No one in my community said that. I know nobody who would say that. And if anybody ever did, I would address it with them.

So I think for our community, we're very vocal about speaking up and saying that actually you are welcome here and you deserve to live here in a good way. If anybody is gonna ask, like, do that inviting, it's gonna be us because we are the First People.

And I remember we did, I think it was like 12 years ago we had a huge gathering of Indigenous and Syrian youth who were new refugees in Edmonton and no one spoke English. We had like this huge gathering and it was really beautiful. And then this became a normal thing on the prairies, is that when refugee communities were coming, that Indigenous people would actually go to the airport and like drum for them.

And so that we can break through those preconceived notions, those outdated and like archaic notions around how we are not working together. And that goes for any movement. And think that there's just so much strength in that. So I thnk that's really important, especially today. Imperialism and colonialism being the beast that we are all up against, that we can start to recognize that we have that common struggle

RESH: Thank you. And in terms of effective organizing Deanna and then Diana.

DIANA G.: Okay. Thank you. I had been participating in meetings recently where Indigenous communities, activists, environmentalists, unionists, and people that work

with refugees and migrants are getting together and speaking up. The recent Bills C-2 and C-12, the, Borders Bill that is introducing legislation against refugees and migrants and reforming the asylum system in Canada, the Canadian culture for refugees. And at this point, 200 organizations got together and we launched recently a campaign that is called We Are Better Together that is providing us with a message guide how to answer to those politicians that said, we are the ones that, because refugees and migrants are coming, that's why we have the rent is so high or we are taking the jobs of Canadian, of the youth.

I empower you to join the campaign. You can do it also as an individual. There have been trainings that you can take on Zoom and that will equip us how to change the rhetoric that we are copying from Europeans and United States, just our neighbor. Because they are building every day walls. No brick by brick, literally, but they are doing it. And they are dividing us. And we should resist that. And we should understand how to answer their message. Because they are the ones who had the money to run these big campaigns. And they are the owners of the media.

And we have two journalists here that are trying put a different rhetoric. But we as individuals, as community workers, we need to empower ourselves how also we can answer in a positive manner to those messages that are dividing us.

And this is not who we are. We are better together as the campaign says. [applause]

RESH: Here, here. Yep.

DIANA M.: Again, speaking to you as community workers, one of the things that you learn in this program is that a good community worker should be able to work with any community. This is not just about your particular area, your niche, but rather about being able to create solidarity movements. That's why you're here. That's a big part of what being a community worker is.

And just listening to Brianna talk, you mentioned that I work with the Shift. It's an international organization that focuses on the human right to housing. And so my immediate boss is Leilani Farha, who's the former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing and also is Palestinian amazing, amazing woman an incredible woman.

In the housing space. her and I have been sidelined, which is really interesting to me, because they don't understand the connections between homelessness and what's happening in Palestine. Which is outrageous because we know exactly what's happening. It's displacement. It's financialization of the land. It's imperialism and it's colonialism. It's the exact same underlying issues that permeate both of these human rights abuses and crises.

You can draw the same connections with every single issue that's happening. These are the underlying factors that can help build the basis for solidarity.

And I keep seeing it. I'm actually very, very in, in optimistic space. Because even though we are dealing with a fascistic political movement globally, we're also seeing that people are starting to find those threads and connect with each other.

Even just recently on Bill-60. It seems outrageous because I, I advocate for people who are homeless. There are tenant advocates, tenant unions. Weirdly, we don't usually talk to each other, which makes no sense because a tenant, you know, they're dealing with folks before they've lost their housing. I'm often working with people after they've lost their housing. And yet for some reason, traditionally we actually haven't had a lot of connection with each other.

Because of Bill-60 we finally actually started to connect and see the links through that piece of legislation. Through Bill-6, through Bill-223, on attacking poor people, people who use drugs, Indigenous people, people who are homeless. Poor people overall, that's the connection between these Bills. And so they're finally seeing that. And they're starting to create those connections elsewhere.

And so for Bill-60, we had so many different groups speak at our recent rally. It was maybe three weeks ago, right when the Bill was being passed. We had harm reduction advocates there. We had housing advocates. Homelessness advocates.

We had cycling advocates there because Bill-60 also attacks cyclists. We also had environmental activists there because Bill-60 also loosens protections in regard to things like building green roofs, for example, in the city of Toronto.

So it's weird because these omnibus bills actually have inadvertently brought people together as well because they're targeting so many different groups at the same time.

Bill-5 was an incredible example of that, that one way or another we're finding each other.

And so I, I feel like we're in a good space right now in terms of actually coming together. And I invite everyone again to look at all these different movements, to look at this kind of legislation, see who's being activated here, see who's advocating.

I will assure you that every single person is motivated by all of these issues that it is brought up about imperialism, about colonialism, about financial extraction. About denigrating poor people so that we can essentially distract so that the rich can get richer, take what they need from us and take from the land.

Anyway, I'm weirdly in a good space about this, even though everything seems to be getting so much worse.

SAMIRA: So there's something I just wanna, draw everyone's attention to and urge you to write to Canada's Museum of Human Rights. And if you feel compelled to tell

them that this is a good thing because they need our support right now. And this is an example of effective campaigning.

So for the past decade, a woman named Rula Jabra, works with a Palestinian organization, has been pushing Canada's Museum of Human Rights in Winnipeg to have a Nakba exhibit. And finally Canada's Museum of Human Rights in June of 2026 is going to put on an exhibit of the Nakba.

For those who don't know, Nakba is Arabic for disaster, but it points to the expulsion, the ethnic cleansing of Palestine and 750,000 Palestinians, and everything that happened during that time in 1948.

So they're gonna be putting on an exhibit in June, 2026. This was a very effective campaign. It took way too long to come to the Museum of Human Rights.

However, there is a massive campaign right now by Zionist organizations within Canada to get this exhibit to not happen. The pressure is on Canada's Museum of Human Rights, so send them a note. Say thank you. Thank you for living up to your own mandate. And that is something that I think everyone in this room could do, which would would be great.

RESH: Absolutely. And Samira just did a powerful episode on that, on her podcast, On the Line. And speaking of that, the last question before I give it out to the audience is very important to this solidarity, to us getting to know each other and understanding what's happening out there is the alternative media.

And we have two journalists here, who are part of that alternative media because we're not getting the news of what's happening in Palestine, what's happening with the homelessness and the houseless crisis, what's happening with food insecurity through the mainstream media. So, Desmond, Samira, speak to the role of alternative media within this.

DESMOND: We do what we can. I mean, it feels daunting sometimes, but I think that that's because we're trained to think about things in a way that replicates what we already have.

So we need to like, usurp and replace the mainstream media or something in order to be effective when that's probably not what we need to do. We're not going to do that because we're not funded by, you know, the wealthiest corporations in this country and continent.

However, I think it's about understanding what our role is often too, in independent journalism. The way I understand my role at The Breach is trying to be in conversation with and amplifying struggle.

What we do isn't the news. What we believe as journalists is not the news. What the last question that you asked, like what people are actually doing to organize that is

working for people that are getting wins for ordinary people, that's what we should always be trying to remain focused on, even if it's at a smaller scale. Because people have talked about relationships and I think that that's what's so important. Is that good organizing, like we've talked about tenant organizing this evening.

I don't know if any of you saw this late last year. I feel it was like about this time last year, and it was like a story that really got to me in a positive way because a group of tenants took over the downstairs property management office. And I think it was like Duffrin and Eglington area because one tenant was going to be evicted. They had put all these extra charges on her in addition to paying her rent and jacking up the price of her rent.

At first, she didn't think that she should pay. Then she agreed to pay. She told them, I can pay you. They said, come down to the office with your card. And they locked her out of her unit while she went downstairs to pay her rent.

And the tenants had been organizing. So they said, you're not gonna do this. And they took over the property management office and they stayed there for 72 hours. And they didn't leave until the company agreed not to evict this woman and they reversed the eviction, right?

That kind of stuff is happening all over the city. People are doing rent strikes in different places in the city where the landlord is very powerful on their own. But when a whole bunch of tenants get together and decide they don't have anything more to lose, they can really fight back.

So I believe we're at our best when our role is amplifying how those relationships are getting built. How actually people are tangibly supporting each other, making a difference in their community where they have influence.

I don't have influence on the west coast of British Columbia where I'm talking about this tanker ban personally. I report on it as a journalist, right? But we all have a certain level of influence in our school community, in our local neighborhood community, in our faith community, in our cultural, religious communities, right? We do have influence in those places.

You know, I'm really excited to see Samira's documentary about the People's Circle for Palestine at U of T. You were there I think every day, almost every day, if not every single day.

SAMIRA: 63 days.

DESMOND: 63 days. And every time I went there, there was food. Every single time. Good food. Donations were being collected. Things that were in excess supply, in some cases at the people's Circle were being donated to other people in the city who needed them, like sleeping bags.

So if we can focus our energy on, in this very bleak time, right, where we don't have the resources to, like, we can't drown out the Toronto Star and CBC and in many ways, that's not what I think we should be trying to do anyway.

But I'm just saying like, media is this fiercely corporate competitive entity in Canada. Owned by like three different companies, right? So we're not going to, as it were, beat them in the Air War for people's attention.

But when we can show that what we're talking about is relevant to people in their communities, that's where I think we can really start to have a tremendous impact.

SAMIRA: Just to pick up off where, what Desmond was saying. I finished one of my last interviews, for the documentary with a young woman that I kept checking in every day at the encampment with. Her name was Erin Mackey. She was 22 when the encampment started and graduated and is now working and really came from the climate justice background. She had never done any Palestine solidarity work before. But she was very savvy with the media and they sort of put her out front as the media spokesperson. And on the last day that the University of Toronto got the injunction to remove the encampment, those students in a matter of 18 hours, totally decamped.

And as someone who was there every day, I saw what they had to actually take apart. They didn't leave any mess at all. And everything that they had, they gave to the encampments throughout Toronto, the tents, the food, the paper towel, like whatever it was.

And she was explaining to me the meeting that the students all had, which by the way, Canada's media was calling "useful idiots" and you know, "tentifada" and "Little Gaza" and all of this stuff.

And you know, they decided, okay, we don't wanna waste all this stuff. And one of the reasons that they actually decamped was because they said, we are sucking up resources from other communities that actually need it. That's amazing.

You know, for first year university students to come to that realization where at the same time our corporate media was vilifying these young people.

And you know, my motto for journalism has always been to make mad the guilty and appall the free. And I think that if we operate from that place, even as citizens, we can really make a change.

RESH: Fantastic. Thank you.

DESMOND: I, I just want to add really quickly to that. That Samira and I were both there when the, student organizers would hold press conferences. And this was some of the most bizarre

SAMIRA: Oh my God!

DESMOND: Bizarre kind of spectacle where all of these journalists who are essentially being forced to go cover this student encampment. 'Cause they, they would rather be on Mars without a frigging space suit than having to go day after day to the Peoples' Circle for Palestine. And they weren't interested in what was happening at the Peoples' Circle for Palestine. So they had these very tired questions that they would always ask every day.

And we got to the point at the end where we were like laughing at them because they would just all, when I say we can't drown them out, there's like two of us and like 20 members of Toronto and sometimes international media. And when they announced that they were going to decamp. Uh,

SAMIRA: Oh my God. It was Shawn O'Shea from Global News.

DESMOND: You remember?

And they're shouting at them..

SAMIRA: Are you going to leave?

DESMOND: Are are you gonna leave?

SAMIRA: What time? What Time?

DESMOND: Will you defy the police? If the police say that they're coming in, are you gonna defy them?

You know, like, just like blood coming out of their mouths as they're saying this. Like, they're so angry and vicious.

SAMIRA: It was almost like they wanted to know, do I have to be here in the afternoon?

Or can I go play golf?

DESMOND: but like, facts!

SAMIRA: I need to be able to plan the rest of my day. What are you gonna be doing?

DESMOND: They were annoyed because they weren't interested in what was going on. They weren't engaged in it. But when I say we can't drown them out, that's what was literally happening is that we're trying to ask questions that are related to what the students are telling us. And there's 30 people shouting behind us being like,

when are you gonna leave essentially? Are you gonna fight with the police if they come here? Right.

And so like we have to cover it in a different way. We have to try and get to things differently. We've got to make relationships with the people who are there to try and get a different story.

DIANA M.: So I deal with the media a lot. I speak on TV and talk to the media a lot. And what they're always trying to do is manufacture the news by constantly trying to manufacture a conflict. Students versus the police, they want that to happen. Not just 'cause they want to get outta there, but because that's a story that they think would be saleable because they get financial compensation from the federal government if they get more coverage and get more viewership, right?

And they always posit it as a kind of neutrality. You know, he said-she said kind of situation when it is never that neutral. And you platform negative voices, NIMBY voices, for example, as being equal in size and just their opinions as people who are again, trying to defend like human rights and people's right to housing.

And it just, it's maddening. It is maddening. So thank you for actually covering the news and not manufacturing.

RESH: Yeah, that deserves a round of applause. So I want to open this up to the rest of our community here so questions.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I have a question for Diana Chan McNally. You talked about negative rights vs. positive rights and I think that's a really interesting concept. I feel that like a lot of the conversation about housing rights, the housing crisis, it's about these negative rights. And that the conversation really needs to be shifted because the positive rights are what's actually gonna get us to the end of this crisis and deliver the human rights.

My question is how can we shift that conversation, not just in government with politicians or the people who create these policies, but also for the community and the wider community that isn't necessarily so involved or knowledgeable about what's going on in our lives.

DIANA M.: Build this knowledge yourselves. Like this is something that you're interested in, I mean, you don't have to read all Isaiah Berlin or anything like that to understand positive rights. But to understand that it isn't just not infringing on people.

So Leilani and I actually wrote, an op-ed in, sorry, the Globe Mail. Uh, We did. Anyway, but we did and it was about a decision in Waterloo regarding an encampment. And so what we won in this decision and everyone was like, what a great win. It was depressing. I was depressed. We won the right for people to squat in a parking lot. That's it. That's it. We didn't take anything away from them, essentially, but we didn't give them anything.

And so her and I just went off about how this was just such a low bar to be considered a win at all.

I think it's really important to educate people that ultimately the goal is housing for everybody. I hate that it's incremental, but it's incremental.

I always get people online who are like, why don't you just let people sleep in your house?

You think I haven't?

DESMOND: Right, facts!

DIANA M.: I've done this A lot of times. I also have had friends who've gotten eviction notices because they've let people stay with them who are not on the lease. So reasonably, I can't even do that without necessarily jeopardizing my own housing.

Educating people about, again, creating the conditions. This can mean, well, I'm not big on zoning reform, but some people are really big on zoning reform for example.

For me right now I'm fighting for, and I also hate it because it's neoliberal, but it's called the Canada Ontario Housing Benefit. It's a rent supplement that the Ford government has dramatically reduced. It's actually the only way right now that we're moving people out of homelessness and into housing.

We were getting 38 million for it two years ago. Now it's 8 million, so we're out of rent supplements until April 1st. They were not housing anyone until April. And then we'll only be able to house 900 people.

I just told you that there's 81,000 people who are homeless just last year. 16,000 at least in the city of Toronto. So, you know, these are ways that we can realize positive rights because it's a real resource that's being distributed. Not my favorite, but right now, one of the few tools that we actually have to expedite people into housing.

So if you want to help, please, please lobby around this because it means the shelter system as we know it, it's already full. You're gonna see a lot more people living in parks.

Right when I just said we are criminalizing people, we have bubble zones. You can't encamp next to a playground. I have people I've worked with who are now registered sex offenders because they've lived in proximity to a playground and they had nowhere to go to the bathroom. And now they're actually convicted as sex offenders and on a registry because of that, right?

So, you know, things like this, Bill-6, which will put you in jail. Fight for the cob with me. That's one small way that you can help. And there I'm sure if you wanna follow

anything that I'm doing, there's lots of different ways that you can help with that as well

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi. My question is for Desmond. ' cause you mentioned something about the importance of consulting alternative media, and that actually kind of raises concerns because I remember like during the lockdown, there were people who were frustrated about the predicament of what they were living in at the time, and felt like their primary source of information were not giving them everything they need. I wonder how do we encourage folks to seek out other reliable news source or alternate source outside of the mainstream without slipping into that alt-right rabbit hole?

DESMOND: I mean, that's a really good question. I think that that comes back to relationships too. So I have a close friend whose brother was extremely skeptical of vaccination, but wanted to go back home and live with their mom, who's more elderly and susceptible. And it's like, but I don't want to get vaccinated myself. Right?

COVID really did a number on us, didn't it?

It challenged our relationships with one another. I think it challenged a lot of our relationships with ourselves. And yeah, it made people deeply insecure about our bodily autonomy and safety and made us scrambling to look for answers. And as happens with any health emergency, some things were wrong at the beginning that were said in mainstream media places. People who are experts and scientists and health professionals didn't always get it right.

And that was exploited by people who wanted to use this as a business opportunity for themselves, who wanted to bring people into other radical spaces, as you say, and bring them down the radical pipeline.

But if we don't have relationships with people, then we can have all of the information in the world and it can be correct if you want to say it that way and it won't matter. And I believe that, and I think about this all the time, it's a great question, right?

We are living in a world where critical thinking is really, really being put to one side. I'm not saying that that was always our strength as human beings, but I feel like something's happening with mass misinformation and disinformation now in a way that we really have to be thinking about.

And it comes down to our relationships. Because you know what? I can argue with somebody for five hours about how the virus transmits. Or we can just talk about like, wouldn't you do everything to protect your mom? And don't you feel like there's something wrong with having this argument that potentially puts her safety at risk? What would you be willing to do to make sure that she was as safe as possible?

Because we can try to use our rational part of our brain for these things, but it's very limited when we don't have relationships with people. Which is why the absolute

most cynical, worst forms of discourse are the types where we see now like these like surrounded panels . Where one person of a political opinion is surrounded by people who apparently take the exact opposite opinion, many of whom are trolls and right wing influencers who are legitimately just there to play fascist devil's advocate.

Yeah? This is not how we communicate with people by this form of cynical discourse and, and cynical debate. We have to leverage our relationships.

Just really quickly. People called me from jail during COVID being like, should I take the COVID vaccine? I'm hearing different things. I don't know if it's safe.

It's life and death. But I felt good when I got those calls because I'm like, I can talk to you about a whole bunch of science, but what I'm happy is that you have enough of a relationship with me in this scary situation that you're like, can we talk about this?

I could work with that. Even if you believe things about the science that I don't believe. If I have enough of a relationship with you to say like, this is why I think this is important and I care about you, and I want you to be safe, and I want our community to be safe. I think that that's gonna go over better than just trying to disseminate the so-called correct information. It's important to have good information, but it's not enough.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, I have a question. I'm a first year student. So listening to the panel, I find the common denominator is the government, aka, the Crown that uses every level of government bylaws to, I guess, stop people having their human rights. And again, I heard that the human rights Charter is a perfect thing that you can't really replace.

What would be a country without the Crown that basically protects corporations from we, the people? What would a this country look like without the government or the crown?

BRIANNA: So all I can speak to is like the context here. Anytime. I'm speaking. I'm speaking as a citizen of the Anishinaabek Nation. A nation that has existed here, since time immemorial, specifically in my homeland of Wikwemekoong Unceded First Nation which is on Manitoulin Island. There's human presence going back 14,000 years, and we are people who have been here since forever. Our creation stories begin here. Our creation stories do not begin anywhere else in the world. So we speak from that experience. And I speak as a member of that nation.

So it's interesting because I can draw from discourse that I've had with you know, a very small demographic of people who are the communist ideology. And there was a discussion once of like, this is my politics and I need to tell you about it before we start working together. And I was like, Yeah great, go ahead. We'll seize the means of production. And then, and like this big thing. And then Indigenous people will somehow, we'll work it out as we go and we'll figure out where, you know, you fit into that.

And I said, okay, well that's actually where this conversation kind of stops because you do not recognize the sovereignty of my nation. You do not recognize the sovereignty of Indigenous nations here because should the government end tomorrow, should the Crown cease to exist here in so-called Canada, what would be left?

Nations who have existed since time immemorial who actually very much still exist? We still practice our governance. We still practice our sacred ceremonies and our connections to the land and our governance around the land, which is what our societies are built around is the land that we are on. That doesn't translate to anywhere else. We can't pick up our nations and move, you know, halfway and around the world and say, oh, we're a nation here now. No, our nation is in relation to the land And all of our governance and all of our, responsibilities in our society are revolving around that.

So I think that, that for me is an easy question. And I think it's a question that I pose to anyone that I organize with. I think it's a question that anyone who's living here in so-called Canada should ask themselves, is do you recognize our nationhood? Do you recognize our sovereignty as nations?

And the reality is, is that I was told a story once by a Mohawk Elder, and he said the relationship between the Crown and the Indigenous Nations here was the original relationship. That was what we see as the primer for what is now so-called Canada. Or the nationstate of Canada. And that since that initial covenant took place, that every successive level of government has forgotten or chose to neglect that original covenent. And to the point that we see like bylaws, which is I would say the most diluted form of governance is not in any way recognizing that original relationship. So that is the problem.

And then you see that actually within Indigenous politics in this country. That's why we don't have clean drinking in the majority of many, many, many Indigenous communities in this country. Is because the federal and the provincial governments are always shirking their responsibility. Oh, it's your responsibility. Oh, it's your responsibility. And they just pass the buck back and forth, right?

So that covenant is just constantly being passed to somebody else. And the responsibility for Indigenous people to live here in perpetuity, in cultural perpetuity forever is constantly put at risk.

So yeah, I think that that's my stance and I challenge people on it often. I think that there's a lack of understanding of the strength and the virality of Indigenous nations. And that is purposeful. That's a purposeful form of miseducation that we receive from this government and all levels of education. And that we have to start pushing back against that.

I think the work that Desmond is doing with The Breach is really revitalizing that Indigenous nationhood and sovereignty and like reminding people that , Hey, actually, oh wow, look, this whole pipeline project could be at risk because

Indigenous Nations are like, what are you talking about? We never agreed to this. To also recognize that that exists not just in theory, but in real world outcomes.

DIANA M.: I actually think we're in an era where we're kind of at the end of the nation state. I think this is just the beginning of it. I think late capitalism has run its course. The nation state has run its course. And we often in modernity kind of think of these things as have always having existed and being the pinnacle of what can be achieved. But it's just an era.

I don't know what comes next. I have no idea. I think that's what we're all trying to figure out and what we're enduring right now is the chaos of the end of this particular era.

But you're talking about governments and the Charter. This is kind of a bit of a tangent, but you may have noticed in different provincial governments that the Premiers keep threatening to invoke the notwithstanding clause.

So you've read the Charter because I know you took the classes. The notwithstanding clause, Section 33 is embedded in there as a fail safe, but it's being abused by Premiers who want to override the Charter itself. What a ludicrous application. You're using the Charter to undermine the Charter.

That means that the Charter is important one way or another. Again, it is so imperfect and the way that we exercise human rights in this country and globally is extremely imperfect. But it does give you a legal mechanism to push back on inequity. It does. So every time they use the notwithstanding clause, they are saying that they don't care about your human rights and they're gonna just circumvent the laws that protect your rights in order to achieve what it is that they need to.

So again, I don't know what's gonna happen, but I think it's important to recognize that even though it feels like we're in this tumultuous era, and we are, there is still power in the Charter. Otherwise they wouldn't be trying to sidestep it altogether, right? So, you know, that's my pitch as well to keep the Charter I suppose, at this point in time,

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was to ask this question as an educator, but I feel like that's kind of missing the point here. So as people who are trying to, who recognize how our relationships with each other, people in our community are really the foundation of how we make change and open our political imaginings as you've so beautifully put here. I wonder how do we build in our relationships those authentic capacities to move , to move ourselves, each other, to build solidarity and to work on creating the kind of worlds where we understand, we action our responsibilities to each other, to those we don't know, to all our relations?

DESMOND: I mean, people are doing it in this school and in this program. The reason that I always say yes, when you ask me to come here... I think I've told this story here before. I'm gonna tell it again briefly.

I was homeless myself more than 20 years ago when I moved to this city. Somebody who took a community worker program referred me to a youth shelter and changed my life. For real.

I got to speak with QP workers, Local 79, many of whom work in shelters, who work providing services for people in the city. And I told them that I was like, people like you always make a difference whether you go to work and come home and feel like you did or not. You are making a difference in people's lives.

Those relationships that are fostered through, like the training given in this program, they change the world. I actually truly believe that. It does have to happen at some level on that individual basis. And again, not everybody has to do the same things. But something that worries me a lot now is that the internet draws our attention everywhere and anywhere and often away from the local places as I was mentioning before, we have the most influence.

And so don't underestimate the impact that you can have amongst your own family, amongst your own friends, amongst your own classmates. Where do you spend the most of your time? If you spend the most of your time at school, that is the place that you should be thinking and making relationships with people and organizing.

If you spend the most of your time at work. This is why unions are a thing, because this is where we have to give our energy. So we might as well do it in the service of making people's lives better, making sure that people's basic needs are met.

But there's a lot of circuses out there now that draw our attention internationally that draw, and I'm not saying it's bad. Of course we need an international, as we've all talked about it here, we need an international lens to the local things that we're also thinking about.

But that's all I would say is that like there's no secret like superhero sauce here, right? Like going to a shelter and meeting another Black person who was a worker there, who immediately was like, I see you and who I could talk to about certain things that I couldn't talk to other people about.

Yeah. That mattered to me.

These are the little miracles that people who are doing community work, people who are doing harm reduction work. I was a harm reduction peer worker when I first got a job. And it's because I went to the youth shelter that they sent me across the street to the youth community center where I got the harm reduction training and, and education that set me on this path. Do not underestimate those relationships, is what I would say. They do matter.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hello. Thank you for coming today. My question kind of builds on that one already. You've all talked about effective movements, and yourself. Diana, you had said the tenancy board and yourself don't really interact all

that much. I found that in my own work we, there's no real cross-communication. So what are the barriers to that? Why is there no cross-communication?

BRIANNA: I think just the daily crisis that everyone is constantly facing. I would say for every respective person here that is like a reality. That there is just... So it's hard to kind of step back and think, oh, okay how can we like strategically move forward?

One of the things that I found particularly helpful recently is Charter challenges. I've had to like, cross paths with and have so many different people from different organizing groups, from different backgrounds, nurses, doctors, lawyers. People who are living outside and using drugs. We are all on this common space of like challenging, you know, doing constitutional challenges against the Ford government.

This is like my new hobby I guess. It'll be my second one in a year. Hopefully soon, it will be announced. But that has been like a fruitful ground because there's like a common goal and we're moving towards something. And I think that it's really cool because it has allowed us to step back and look at who has the best position to do these things. But then also like finding roles for everybody. Not everybody's gonna be like the main affiant .But there's gonna be other people that can be in the back and do other roles. And so like really finding places for all these community groups.

And there's like so many. Like I'm talking like on a call, there's like 22 community groups that are all together. So I think that that's been really beautiful. And that's been a place of like very fruitful organizing. And I think that as Indigenous poeple that, you know, for many years, like our people had no access to lawyers. We weren't allowed to challenge the government's like regressive laws that directly targeted and took away our rights.

We couldn't get a lawyer to be able to fight in court. So I do think as much as there is a limitation to that, I think that as an Indigenous person there's a lot of power in that. And that I do think that there are a lot of legal challenges that are happening in this country around human rights, around environmental rights, around all these things that are actually leveraging Indigenous people as the main focus. And everyone's putting their power behind that. Because it's really, really, really powerful.

And I think that the one thing I just wanna leave with is that there was the forum ... so we were talking about having an Indigenous Tribunal on the genocide of Palestine. And that, that being like a focus on having Indigenous people who have been the victims of genocide being some of the people that can platform and have like an arena for that conversation. So again, it's like getting behind and then just finding out ways that you can like that you can organize in your community. And working towards that common goal I think has been for me a way that we've been forced to actually work together. And it's been really really lovely. And people that I never thought I would talk to. And yeah, it's just really cool.

DIANA M.: I would say a barrier is bureaucracy. You know, a lot of our sectors are highly siloed in terms of the funding structures. Just in terms of who technically you're answering to, like what Ministry or are you city funded? So even in the shelter

system, there's like, I know the city funded shelter system. I have no idea what happens in the violence against women shelter system because we don't talk to each other, which is bizarre.

I only started working with refugees. I mean, it was always a part of my work, but once we saw in 2023 that African refugees were abandoned out onto the street. Which is how I came to know Deanna.

It actually is easier saying your name that way because, I, I hate saying my own name out loud. It's weird. I don't know. It makes me feel weird.

But these situations that are being created that actually impact larger groups with intersections that we may not be aware of prior. But these intersections do exist.

I've been talking a lot with a lot of climate activist groups and they're asking me about homelessness as a result of climate change. Climate refugees. These are things that are top of mind, and those intersections do exist.

So, you know, if you're talking about, or thinking about trying to create those connections, think about what the intersections actually are. Get around the bureaucracy if you're out in the world and you're actually working in your field.

These things are just structures. And they actually silo us and keep us from thinking about things like colonialism and imperialism and financialization of labour and financialization of the land.

Again, recently I got thrown out of the Ontario legislature with a bunch of people during [applause] Oh, we didn't even get ticketed. That was great... normally you get ticketed. ...during Bill-60. And there was a large group of primarily South Asian men who were also protesting at the same time.

They have been living here for many, many years. They've been working, they've been paying taxes, and yet they've now been denied their ability to actually stay here permanently.

And I was just standing outside with them just talking about like, tell me about what's going on with you. Why is this happening? What is the issue? And the ultimate issue again is financialization of poor people and exploitation. It's like, oh, we have the same issues. That's the connection. That's the intersection. You can find them. If you just have those conversations and you look. They're actually very, very apparent.

RESH: And does anyone else want to come in on that as well. Samira.

SAMIRA: I can only speak to just the communities that I've covered and that I've seen. I haven't really made these connections to myself. But I remember when I was covering the encampment, it was on the second or third day that the Indigenous community came onto the lawn of the University of Toronto and built a sacred fire.

And this really complicated things for the University of Toronto. I firmly believe that it was one of the reasons why they could not get the police to come in and brutalize the students as they had done in University of Alberta and York University and other places. And the Palestinian Youth Movement made that connection with the Indigenous community very early on when they started organizing.

And the reason this created a problem for the University of Toronto is because the University of Toronto likes to think of itself as, you know, really progressive, believe it or not. And you know, when it comes to Indigenous rights, they're at the forefront and blah, blah, blah. And I believe, correct me if I'm wrong, it's illegal to put out a sacred fire. Yeah, well, you can be challenged if you, do it. So that that was an example, and something that I learned. And it was the first time that I had been invited into a circle at a sacred fire.

The reason I say this is because those young people made that connection very early on. And the Indigenous community was right there with them, many times putting their bodies on the line inside that encampment. And on the outside, because every day rabid agitators would come and instigate violence against both the Indigenous community and the students that were organizing on the inside of the encampment.

DIANA G.: I would like to add the word "solidarity", because that's it. The system want us being isolated. And solidarity is a word they trying to penalize and have relationship with. You are bringing here cows. No solidarity is going and bringing the power that the Indigenous community have with the Palestinian movement. Bringing the solidarity of the unions back to us, back to the people. Because some unions have been forgetting why they were created. What is the fight. What is the real fight. And believing in them. Then also lending our voice. Being a community worker. Being the first face that a refugee is seeing in Canada and seeing the welcoming and seeing the support means a lot.

Don't forget about our roots That just you listening to somebody means the world to somebody. And keeping solidarity to any movement that is fighting against capitalism and dividing us.

RESH: That was Co-Executive Director of the FCJ Refugee Center and past President of the Canadian Council for Refugees, Diana Gallego, Co-Lead of Toronto Indigenous Harm Reduction and Native Arts Society and member of Wiikwemkoong Unceded First Nation, Brianna Olson Pitawanakwat, award-winning journalist, documentary filmmaker, and founder of On the Line Media. Samira Mohyeddin, founder and coordinator of the Ontario Coalition for the Rights of Homeless People, Diana Chan McNally and independent journalist, bestselling author and podcast host with The Breach, Desmond Cole.

The December 10th Human Rights Day panel was the first in a series of events celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Community Worker Program at George Brown College in Toronto. A program rooted in community organizing, social justice advocacy, and human rights.

For more information about the Community Worker Program, how to apply or to make a donation to the Community Worker Student Bursary, please see the links in the show notes to this episode.

And please join us again in January for the return of the Courage My Friends podcast.

I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

And, as always, thanks for listening.

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: You've been listening to the Courage My Friends Podcast, a co-production between rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute at George Brown College.

Produced by Resh Budhu of the Tommy Douglas Institute, Breanne Doyle of rabble.ca and the TDI planning committee: Chandra Budhu and Ashley Booth.

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