



PHOTO BY CELESTE NOCHE

Street Roots vendor "Netty" Johnson interviews DeRay McKesson about the Black Lives Matter movement before his March 15 speech at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Portland.

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it in this moment. We're not the first people to say it, and hopefully we will be some of the last people to say it, because it just won't be true, so when I think about the message, the message is not bringing the trauma into people's neighborhoods; the trauma was already in the neighborhood. We're just saying that this is happening. When I think about the power of the statement for young people, and I think about the power of the statement for adults, it is about saying that black lives have value, even when the system doesn't treat them as such. It's about creating common language and a shared understanding of that.

You wouldn't go to a breast cancer rally and say "colon cancer matters." We can focus on one thing and be proud of focusing on that one thing, and we are. When I think about myself as one of the people in Ferguson and the initial wave of the protest – the police killed Mike Brown; they killed him – there might have been a space for a consequence for whatever law he seemingly broke, but it wasn't death. And the police have killed so many people all across the country since. And we have just been saying that out loud.

N.J.: *I have been in and out of prison for over 22 years. I have 14 years now in recovery, and a lot of that, when we look back at it 14 years later, a lot of it was mental health issues that I'm working on. A lot of my family members, out of 11, six were incarcerated. What events in your own life influenced your decision to drive to Ferguson, Mo., and join the movement?*

D.M.: Three big things. One is that both of my parents were addicted to drugs. My mother left when I was 3; my father raised us. I'm 32 now; she came back when I was 30. And I think about what it meant as a young person to grow up in a community of recovery and to see people, adults, all around me, every single day, putting their lives back together in ways that they had been told was impossible. So when I thought about me taking risks, it was like I grew up seeing people take risks in their own personal life every day and make community

again when they said it was impossible.

Second, I used to teach middle school. I used to teach sixth-grade math, 11-year olds, which was great, and it wasn't their fault that the world wasn't fair. It wasn't their fault that they grew up in poverty. It wasn't their fault that they grew up in the projects. They didn't do anything wrong. It was a system that failed them. And when I think about my role as an adult, I always think about those kids. That it's one of my responsibilities as an adult to make sure that they grow up in a world with different choices. They didn't do anything wrong, and they shouldn't be penalized for it.

And the third is that they killed a kid. Mike was 18, about to go to school. At that point in my life, I was having this moment about what does it mean to live the things that we say we're committed to, and that if I truly believed, then the least I could do was go down for two days. I went down on Saturday morning, and I was just going to go for two days and help out where I could and see what happened, and I got there, and I was like, this is crazy! I stayed much longer, and now I do a lot more. But at the beginning, it was like the least I can do is just see what's going on.

Emily Green: *You grew up, went to college and worked on the East Coast, but since becoming deeply involved in the civil rights movement, you've traveled to places like South Carolina, Missouri – What has being involved in the movement in those parts of the country taught you about today's civil rights struggles in America?*

D.M.: People will ask me, why am I making it about race? And it's like, race is making it about me. I didn't do that. And that is all across the country, everywhere I go, I'm reminded – you think about places like this where you can't see the disparities – there are some cities you walk in and you see the disparities. I'm from Baltimore. You just drive down the street and you see – the disparities are stark. There are places like Minneapolis, places like Portland, where you don't see the disparities in the same way, even though the disparities are present. And I'm even more mindful of how it's easy to give lip service to the idea of equity; it's easy

to do the performance and da da da, but the issues are actually everywhere. The disparities, the outcomes are still bad all across the country in communities of color.

So that's one, the second is that there are people who are committed and ready everywhere. They might not always believe they have the power or the influence; they may not understand that there are people who will stand with them when it gets hard, but the people are there.

E.G.: *Was there anything that was surprising to you when you visited those parts of the country?*

D.M.: Not the places; more so the time. You think about the beginning of the protests.

People thought there was a problem in Ferguson; they didn't think that there was problem in America, so it didn't matter where we went in the beginning. Everywhere we went, people were like, "Oh Ferguson has a problem." They were like, "My town's fine," or "My city's OK." It's like, no. The police are killing people here, too. Everywhere sort of had that problem in the beginning.

N.J.: *When a person has a criminal record and they're trying to make it in life, it haunts you. You try to apply for a job, get an apartment, or get pulled over by the police, and they run your name. Is there anything that Black Lives Matter is aiming to do to help individuals that have a past that's not pleasant but have made a complete change and that want to participate – maybe get a job that is not going to involve a lot of dealing with people's other assets but they just want to*

"We didn't name it 'Campaign Almost Zero' or 'Campaign Shoulda, Coulda, Woulda Zero' or 'Campaign I Hope We Can Do It.' We named it Campaign Zero because we feel confident that we can live in a world where the police don't kill people."

DERAY MCKESSON

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