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R.47. Speaking of Feminism: Today's Activists on the Past, Present, and Future of Feminism

Interview R-0879

Tara Hall

July 23, 2015

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ABSTRACT – TARA HALL

Interviewee: Tara Hall

Interviewer: Rachel Gelfand

Interview date: July 23, 2015

Location: Refugee Women’s Network, Decatur, GA

Length: 1:25:47

Tara Hall is the Executive Director of the Refugee Women’s Network (RWN). She was born in 1969 in Long Beach, CA. Her mother fled her a domestic violence situation in California and came to Atlanta when she was 11 years old. She married and had two children, but then fled domestic violence herself. She was a barber at Supercuts and decided to go back to school. Her mother was a big role model (she also went back to school and became a minister). Tara talks about her college graduation and the haven she found at Point University. She describes her difficulties getting out of her marriage. She makes the connections between her previous work in domestic violence advocacy and her current position in the Refugee Women’s Network. She talks about xenophobic bias in the neighborhood and describes the work of the organization. They help new arrivals settle and start businesses. Most centrally, they provide a network of support. RWN offers business loans through a federal grant. On the issue of the economic downturn, she says she was not at the organization, but staff numbers have decreased dramatically from its heyday in the late 90s. Concerning racial violence, she describes the racial profiling refugees experience. She mentions a high level of suicide—especially among men in refugee communities and notes difficulties with employment, transportation, etc. She says that LGBT issues can be challenging. RWN needs to be a resource to any refugee—regardless of sexuality or gender identity—and they need to help parents who are not open to their children’s sexuality and identity. She says RWN has work to do to get up to speed on social media. It is necessary with a new generation of donors. Millennials want the convenience of digital donating. She talks about RWN’s role in a mayoral committee on affordable housing and about her concerns for the next presidency. What keeps her up at night is how to keep the organization afloat. She has been works to get more individual donors and become less grant-reliant. We end with a discussion of feminism. I describe Third Wave feminism and ask her relationship to feminist history. All her work has been in advocacy for women. She notes that she has been characterized as “man-hating.” In terms of challenges, she wonders if feminists or women advocates are taken seriously. There is such a gap between the experience of white male lawmakers and refugee women of color. She discusses the difficulty of legislative politics. She talks about the global aspects of her work and the importance of addressing trauma. Tara tells of throwing an International Women’s Celebration and how effective it was. After wrapping up, I ask

about feminism once more. She says she doesn't let anything to get in her way. She talks about what she sees with her daughter's generation and the role of sexism in hip hop.

FIELD NOTES – TARA HALL

Interviewee: Tara Hall
Interviewer: Rachel Gelfand
Interview date: July 23, 2015
Location: Refugee Women's Network, Decatur, GA
Length: 1:25:47

THE INTERVIEWEE. Tara Hall is currently the Executive Director of the Refugee Women's Network. She was born in 1969 in Long Beach, California and spent her early days in San Diego. At 11, she moved to Atlanta, as her mother was fleeing domestic violence. Tara married and had two children, but then fled herself due to domestic violence. She went back to school and graduated with Bachelors of Science in Human Relations with a specialization in Counseling from Point University. She began working at a 24-hour crisis hotline. She then worked at the YWCA of Greater Atlanta and the Atlanta Mission. In 2011, she became the Executive Director of Family Haven in Forsyth County and Director of Emergency Services for Tallatoona Community Action Partnership. She has worked for 15 years in the nonprofit sector advocating for the rights of domestic violence victims, human trafficking victims, homeless women and their children, and persons recovering from addiction.

THE INTERVIEWER. Rachel Gelfand is a Ph.D student in American Studies at UNC Chapel Hill. She is conducting research for Rachel Seidman's book project on feminism.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview was conducted on a Thursday afternoon in Tara Hall's office at the offices of the Refugee Women's Network (RWN), which works with refugee women from 40 countries. She had a two-month old kitten in the office. It was the first interview of my research trip to Atlanta. In the interview, we discuss her personal history and the generations of domestic violence in her family. Tara talks about her role models and her decision to go back to college. She left an abusive relationship and went back to school with two children. This was a huge challenge and graduation day was a key moment in her story. She talks about working the 24-hour crisis hotline at a domestic violence shelter and her beginnings as an advocate. We hone in on questions of economic, political, and social issues affecting her and RWN. She discusses issues affecting refugee women and the support network RWN provides. She brings her personal and professional experiences in trauma and women's advocacy to this position. She describes difficulties in meeting the needs of community members who are also in the sexual minority. She talks about the importance of social media in fundraising as well as the difficulties of working with local politicians. Towards the end of the interview we talk about feminism, issues of popular culture, and the importance of throwing parties for the women of RWN.

TRANSCRIPT – Tara Hall

Interviewee: TH TARA HALL

Interviewer: RG Rachel Gelfand

Interview Date: July 23, 2015

Location: Unknown

Length: 1:25:46.5

RACHEL GELFAND: Okay. So everything looks good. Levels look fine. So we'll just record and then—[beeping noise]

TARA HALL: Hopefully got this down from all the way up [referring to p.]

RG: It's really not a problem if it's—

TH: Okay.

RG: On.

TH: All right.

RG: Okay. So it's a, like that's a life history form. This is sort of like starts a little bit of your history. So the interview begins with sort of tell me a little bit about yourself, where you grew up, where you began.

TH: Well, my name is Tara Hall. I am forty-five years old. I'll be forty-six in just a few weeks. I grew up in, was born and grew up in California, born in Long Beach and grew up in Los Angeles and San Diego. What brought my mother and I here to Georgia over thirty years ago was my mom was fleeing from domestic violence. Grew up in a very violent home, and in order to stay alive we had to leave. And so we took Greyhound bus here to Georgia with twenty dollars, a bag of oranges and a roll of toilet paper. We

didn't know where we were going to stay. Mom didn't have job. We just knew we had to step out on our faith and make it here.

So when I came to Atlanta, I was eleven years old. And we had some friends who were here who took us in. And Mom was able to find a job, and the rest is history in terms of how we got back on our feet.

I married a wonderful husband who is a police officer. And little did I know that I was following in my mom's footsteps. And I'm a survivor of domestic violence. And we had two children. They are now twenty-three, and my daughter soon will be twenty-five. And I got into this line of work because I was fleeing domestic violence myself, and I knew that I had to take care of my children. At the time I was working for Supercuts. I was a barber for Supercuts. And I developed carpal tunnel so it was difficult to use my hands. So I said I had to use my mind. So I didn't know anything about domestic violence shelters or anything like that. So I just knew that I wanted to go back to school. And I looked into Atlanta Christian College and enrolled, and then they gave me non-traditional housing for me and my children. They gave me a scholarship to go to school, and that's where I studied psychology and human relations and did my internship from there and worked in a domestic violence shelter answering the crisis lines. And that's where I needed to be. And that's where my career started in nonprofit. And I quickly started working for the victims, answering the crisis lines and then being a child advocate and then shelter manager and then program manager and then director and started my career working from there into homeless populations and now working with refugees.

RG: Right into the crisis. Twenty-four hour hotline is an intense line of work.

TH: Oh yeah, it is.

RG: So living here what was school like right before you went back to school. Or who were your early role models coming into this?

TH: Actually my mother was my role model because as a child I watched her endure so much. And I really can say she's like my hero because having gone through domestic violence. I've seen my grandmother go through it, aunts and she'd go through it. She had the courage to get out, and even though she loved my father dearly she made a huge decision for us to leave that situation.

And when we got here, when I was about a senior in high school my mom went back to school. And she had a double major and was on, graduated top of her class. And she got a major in psychology as well as biblical studies, and she wound up being called into ministry, which is rare in that time to have an African American woman especially being called into ministry and to preach and pastor over thirty years. It was amazing for her at that time. So she was kind of like a pioneer.

And so having come out of my situation she was my backbone. She really was, encouraged me. And then when I made that decision she was right there with me to help and even encouraged me to go back to school. So I wasn't afraid as a single mom, filing for a divorce, being stalked and hunted down like an animal by my ex, that I didn't, I just knew that I had to not only do it for myself but for my kids. And so being able to graduate the most amazing thing at that time was when my kids told me that they were proud of me. So that was a wonderful experience. The work was hard; I wanted to give up, but I had my counseling professor was encouraging me not to give up and my kids were my cheerleaders and ironically enough when I graduated, my ex-husband was there and told me he couldn't believe I did it. But he was proud of me. Not that I needed his

validation but just to be able to show him that I was smart, all those times he told me I wasn't, I felt vindicated. [laughs]

RG: Yeah, clearly. You do important work in the world. So I also never even said my name. My name is Rachel Gelfand. That should be on the tape, and today is July 23rd, 2015. So were your expectations kind of going off doing the college work was that an experience where you were finding out about sort of this feminist activist work or was it a different experience than you thought it would be or—?

TH: It was a different experience than I thought it would be. It was challenging because I was a nontraditional student. So here I am on a campus with all these young people. I mean it was other nontraditional students there and us nontraditional students developed relationships, became like family on campus, but it was a lot harder because I wasn't just responsible for myself. I still had to make a way to make sure my kids were able to eat. I was going through divorce. I was trying to make sure they were safe. My, I had sole custody with my children and he was supposed to have supervised visitation, and he wound up taking my children out of the state and wouldn't tell me where they were. So it was going through all that was very stressful.

RG: Yeah, there's no word for that.

TH: At the same time I had to study and not allow my kids to see me fall apart and then be strong for them and to help them go through it through that whole process of their family being torn apart. But the professors there were amazing because they, I shared my experiences with them. And at some point the college became involved in, had to take out a temporary protective order against my ex because he wasn't allowed on the

property to keep me and the kids safe because he stole my car and just doing all kinds of things to intimidate me.

RG: Sometimes a university wouldn't do that.

TH: And so going through, it was a huge support system. And I really had to push myself because it was a learning experience for me in terms of being able to rediscover myself. Because for so long in that relationship I was so programmed to do what I needed to do to keep the peace in my home so he wouldn't get mad so I wouldn't feel like I was the problem and there would be another fight. So going back to school I had to learn how to think and do for myself things that I wanted to do versus trying to please him. Little things like okay after class I'm going to go to the mall and I'm going to stay as long as I want to without feeling like I have to hurry and get back and cook dinner or else he'll get mad. Little things. And even looking at myself in the mirror and being honest with myself and learning how to love myself and appreciate myself again and to tell myself that I was smart, that I was beautiful, that I was a good mother, that none of that stuff that happened to me in that marriage was my fault.

So I had to reprogram my thinking and start appreciating who I was for the person that I truly am. And every time I aced a test or aced a class or passed a class I was patting myself on the back. And so that day when I graduated it was more than just a certificate of accomplishment. It was for me it was life changing. It allowed me to go and tell other women who were being victims regardless as victims of war or victims of domestic violence or sexual assault, human trafficking that whatever they're, they truly desire to do or want to be that they could do it. So—

RG: So what was that like when you entered that work, the first it was working in a domestic violence center?

TH: First, my first experience on the crisis line it was a, it was heartbreaking especially having coming out of it myself. I remembered those moments so I was able to actually understand from the victim's point of view their fear, their frustration, their anxiety. I understood all that. I even understood why they wanted to stay and didn't want to leave because they loved the man. They just didn't like his behaviors. But I think that made me a huge advocate, a better advocate because I wasn't just someone on the other end of the phone that was judging them as a textbook case if you will. But I knew firsthand what it was like so I was able to help them or coach them how to stay safe, what to do and what not to do to stay alive and give them the resources they needed or whatever. But I think the most traumatizing case that I had was hearing a woman locked in the bathroom with no way out calling for help, and her husband broke in the bathroom, and all I heard her do was scream and the phone went dead. And I don't know what happened on the other end. So I called the police and sent them there, but I don't know what the outcome is. Those are those scary moments like that.

RG: Haunting. Yeah. What was the kind of political climate doing that work and being, entering those nonprofits?

TH: Nonprofit work especially in the work that we do even here working with women who are minorities, who whether it's working with domestic violence victims or the women that we work with here who are survivors of war, the political climate is always a challenge working through it in terms of advocating for the women we work with or educating the judicial systems or the law enforcement officers or even their

community at large because there's always a level of bias that you have to push through even with victims of domestic violence. Oh she must like it otherwise she would leave. Why does she stay? Even with victims of war the women we work with, the bias of people not understanding what a refugee or asylee is. If you're, I hear this all the time why are those people. Why don't they just stay where they were? Or Americans need jobs, why are we helping other people like them? And I understanding when I rephrase it and say okay, Refugee Women's Network we're here to help women survivors of war. Then when you hear it that way, then you're like oh it sounds different.

But to say the refugee, there's a lot of bias even in DeKalb County. Here there's a large population of refugees who reside here in the state of Georgia especially in Clarkston, which is where we are basically. And the community doesn't want to accept any more refugees in the community because they feel like there's too many. And so what we have to realize and educate our community and our political leaders is that these families have been uprooted from everything that they've known and are expected to come here to a foreign country, learn a language, find a job, pay their rent within ninety days of getting here and it's impossible. So here there's a community, a feeling of home because you have such a wide variety of persons from all around the world in this area where they set up businesses and set up homes, and they feel comfortable with a support network around them that's familiar to them. But yeah, pushing through the laws and educating and, it's always going to be a challenge.

RG: So what kind of, what's your role here?

TH: My role with this organization is I'm the Executive Director. And what I bring to this organization is my experience with working with persons recovering from

trauma basically. I've already talked about the domestic violence victims. But that also includes our sexual assault victims and human trafficking victims. And I have all this [traumatic?] experience in terms of working with nonprofits. I can talk about that all day long but what I bring the personal experience that I bring to this organization is that I'm a survivor too. And it may not be that I've been in another country where I'm a survivor of war because of politics. But I'm a survivor of war in my own home when I'm having to battle a man that said he would love me and our children and it was a war zone in my own home. So I can understand from my point of view what some of the post-traumatic stress issues that our families suffered. From the fear of not knowing what your life is going to be like, having to leave your home and go to something new, and wanting to make a better life for yourself and your children and having to start from scratch to do that. So that's what my responsibility or role is here for the organization.

RG: So I guess I want to go to the kind of questions about since the [19]90s. This organization began in the mid [19]90s and you were doing other work but have a lot to say about how those organizations were experiencing the political climate like you're saying. One thing, there's a few things that sort of highlighted in these questions. There's the economic crash in 2008. How did that affect your work, the organization?

TH: Well, what I can say is this organization was started—this year will be twenty years old in September actually. We'll be celebrating it in August, on August 20th. And speaking with the founder of the organization she was telling me that the organization was never meant to be a direct service organization. That the primary focus of the organization was to help refugee and immigrant women become leaders in their community. So one of our hallmark programs was creating the leadership program where

women from all over the United States were recruited to attend a week long workshop helping them build the skills to become leaders in their communities. And once they graduated from that workshop they were charged with going back to their communities and help other women with that curriculum that they learned. As a result other nonprofits were birthed and business were birthed out of that training all over the United States and even in other countries because we service women from other sixty countries.

But there were other women who had a voice, who wanted something more. And so we talk about the economic crash of our nation and women who came here from other countries, even if they were doctors or attorneys or accountants unfortunately their skills weren't transferrable here, and they were resorted, had to resort to working in chicken factories or babysitting or housekeeping. But they wanted, they had skills. Even women who worked as farmers in their countries or sewed or whatever it was, they wanted to do something for their families because coming here if you didn't speak the language and your skills weren't transferrable it was very difficult to find a job. So as a result our organization started a micro-enterprise program where women who wouldn't otherwise qualify for traditional loans could come to us and we would give them loans to help give them capital monies to help them start their businesses. So they were able to get anywhere from \$500 to \$15,000 to start their own business with the help of us helping to prepare a business plan, provide all kinds of training regarding business in the United States and how they could open up a business and just everything, technical assistance once the business is open. And so that's how we addressed that issue. And as a result there were hundreds of businesses that were established through the organization from bakeries, hair salons, braiding salons, catering businesses, import-export businesses. All

sorts of businesses have been birthed to address that issue because we gave women an opportunity to be able to be self-sufficient by being business owners and entrepreneurs.

RG: So kind of it being a bad economy this was doing, maybe starting your own business was easier than finding, not easier but would maybe be a better avenue finding a job in the job market.

TH: Because they wouldn't qualify for a job. So being in this area of the DeKalb County you'll see that there are certain pockets where it's heavily refugee populated, and there are certain like mini-strip malls and you'll see that there, for example there's a Somali strip not too far from here to Memorial Drive where there are several businesses. There's an accountant business. There's a garment shop where a women who sells import-export clothing from Somalia there. There are food businesses. So if that, starting a business made more sense than trying to apply for a job that you were overlooked over for because if you couldn't speak English, then you couldn't read how to fill out the application. And you can't speak to your employer and you can't speak to your clients, the customers if you're going to customer service or—. So some of them even resorted to being taxi drivers and starting their business that way because they knew they were able to at least be able to sustain their families.

RG: That's great that that, that there was money to offer, to kind of seed money to start those.

TH: Yeah, well, we received a huge grant from the Office of Refugee Resettlement to operate that program. And so as women were given the loans they would have to pay it back, and that money is recycled. So every woman has an opportunity to

apply for a loan with that money. We can't, it's restricted so we can't do anything else with it but help the community to start businesses.

RG: And is that, will that continue or is that, is there sort of an end date on that?

TH: It will continue. Yep.

RG: That's interesting. And I'm not from here, but there's a whole neighborhood geography that I wouldn't know coming in, but I'm sure you know from being part of this organization. I want to keep going through these questions. Yeah, there's--. But really it makes me well, I'll just do them. I, so the reason, so this is pretty much I think talking about Charleston even though it was maybe written before. There's been a lot of racialized violence in the forefront of people's minds. How do you engage in conversations through your work and how have they shaped your organization's approach if at all? So just, racist violence that goes on.

TH: Since I've been with this organization what I've heard from the women that we serve is that there's even with their husbands that there's some level of fear because they don't understand the laws fully. They've been given, they come here and they've been given a very quick overall orientation of how of the laws here and then you're on your own. So what I hear in particular is that some of them feel like they have been racially profiled because they're Muslim. And again that goes back to us having to have that discussion along with our community partners who also serve refugees and talk about these biases that are happening through law enforcement or just community at large regarding the populations that we serve especially the Muslim population. Some of them feel like they've been targeted, and then they have to go court. They don't understand what I means to go have a ticket and you have to pay. They're asking certain questions

and they feel like that because the arresting officer or the police officer is not able to communicate with them or they don't understand English well and are not able to understand what the officer is saying that they feel like they have been--. What am I trying to say, they've been--they have faced prejudice.

RG: Right.

TH: Then I have a group of women who feel like they haven't really experienced that. And my question for them is are you sure or are you just don't understand what it is. Do you not recognize being mistreated in a certain way or being discriminated against in a certain way? So it's really hard to just pinpoint and say exactly what it is, but I know with us as service providers we've had that conversation about the prejudice and the racial profiling and the lack of understanding from those who make the laws or enforce the laws and the people that we serve.

RG: Do the businesses come across that kind of bias in the law or the way they are trying to apply for licenses or issues like that?

TH: Yeah. It's very hard again. Once a resettlement agency brings people here to the United States, they keep them, they help them stabilize for about ninety days, and they're, then those families are on their own. So we are not a resettlement agency, but we are those, we are an organization that kind of picks up where the resettlement agency leaves off. And unfortunately what us as service providers have seen even I want to say the Burma or Bhutan communities, there's been a high level of suicide because-- especially among the men--because they feel like they can't take of their families or they're not a man because at home they had more control of being able to keep their household together. But here there's, they're either getting eviction notices or they can't

get a job or the lights. It's too much having to adjust your whole life. And there's been a high level of suicides rate as a result of that.

And when it comes to employment again if you don't speak the language and you used to be, I think the word that best captures this is that they felt like they were somebody at home, but coming here they feel like they're nothing and made to feel that way. So it's very discouraging. Again we don't speak the language, and there's that language barrier between you and the employer. And you're having to resort to being paid less than minimum wage because some of them have been, some of the people who are working have been taken advantage of by a certain population of employers or businesses because they feel like they don't know that they're being taken advantage of so they just take advantage of them. And we work with people often to help them understand what your rights are as an employee, what your rights are as a tenant, with your landlord so those type of things don't happen. But unfortunately there are people out there that don't mean well in terms of the people they work with and they do take advantage of them.

RG: What I was going to say before is that I used to work at a nonprofit where I taught computer classes. And I taught English classes at different levels, and it was just I learned a lot in a very short period of time especially different age groups, and if you're in high school what that feels like if you arrive here and if you're elderly—

TH: Yeah, we see the same problems even with health care. It's frustrating when you're sick or your loved one is sick or your parent who is elderly is sick and you don't speak the language and the doctors who are required to—

RG: It's the law.

TH: Make sure you have an interpreter there, and they don't provide one, and you don't get the services because they'll tell you to come back or they can't help you. Or even to understand how to access the system, how access health care, come here and you're given a Medicaid card, but do you really know what it's like to have to go through Grady and to set up an appointment and where to wait and how to even catch the bus to get there.

RG: Right.

TH: Everything is foreign. Everything is new and frustrating. You need someone who can help with that process. It's been a challenge for some of our clients. They try using MARTA [Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority], and they wind up on the other side of Georgia trying to get—

RG: Is there sort of a mentor, sort of peer groups, people helping each other.

TH: That's what we have. That's what we've created. One of my staff she is a survivor of war herself. She is a former refugee from Iraq. And she provides direct services and emergency services for those families who are new arrivals here and even those who have been here a while. And we have developed a core group of women who have been here for some time that have learned our systems. So when we have new people come, we have a network of women that can like mentor them or shadow them so they can understand what to do or how to go to the doctor. Or if you need an interpreter, we have someone who can go to the doctor with you, how to enroll your children in the school, how to get your prescription filled and all those kind of things.

RG: And how did the organization decide to be Refugee Women's Network instead of just refugee network? Do you know?

TH: The organization was founded by a group of refugee women, and they wanted it to be for refugee women and even our board a requirement is at least half have to be refugee or former refugee women. And so it was just, the owner saw a, the founder of the organization saw a need in the community, and they wanted to meet that need and that's how it was birthed.

RG: Yeah, take a break if you need a break. It's a lot of talking. Recently the Supreme Court decided to legalize gay marriage. Has LGBT rights been, how does it intersect with your organization, or conversations about sexuality and identity and trans issues?

TH: Well, just from my experience, it hasn't, we haven't had a whole lot of that issue here, but just from learning from the women that we work with and the different cultures, that's a topic that's not, that's not supposed to be talked about, just from the various cultures. Some of them have even stated that if something, if someone in your family or your community is gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, queer that is something that is looked down upon. And, but us an organization we know that we have populations that fit within those groups. And so us as an organization with me being a new director especially, I'm trying to restructure our programs so that we meet people where they are regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation and provide whatever services that they ask us for.

What my challenge is is creating those resources and those partners in the community to help us be a resource, and it's a challenge for me because for example having relationships with faith based organizations that are there or here, it's something new for this organization. It doesn't, or we never had a very strong relationship with our

faith based organizations. And my thing is if you are going through trauma, whether it's war or post-war or whatever, then you're having to deal with your personal issues on top of that or being discriminated against because your lifestyle doesn't meet the criteria of someone else. And you haven't, you feel like you're not being accepted or you're not being accepted we need to find faith based organizations that will accept people who fit within that context so that they can move on with their life, feel like they have that support network. And again it goes back to educating those communities and creating awareness and unfortunately as a community we're not there yet. We're getting better. But when you're already a minority and then your lifestyle or your sexual orientation is another minority of the minority, you face so many more barriers than anyone else. That's, it's heart wrenching. But with us being a population, an organization that works with a diverse population, cultures I'm hopeful that with my experience with other organizations that we can be a resource not only for the people we serve but for those other organizations that focus on working with persons in that area so that we have someone to refer, an organization that we can refer those individuals to or at least have them come to us so we can have them be able to help them in any capacity that they ask us for. So it's still a challenge. It really is unfortunately.

RG: Well, it's work. People come in with all types of—

TH: Everything.

RG: Politics and issues and needs.

TH: Yeah, because we're dealing with again our community is already, again I see strides, but I also see where the barriers still lie. And as I'm looking at even teenagers who are coming here as survivors of war in their countries and yet they identify

themselves as male or female and their families are not accepting of that and want to kick them out of the home and then they're still children. They're still kids regardless. But you're having to deal with the mental trauma of having to lose everything, your home, your friends, your school, everything that you know and then come to a foreign country and learn a whole new culture and then—

RG: Have a new round.

TH: It's just the stories that you hear and see, it can be very heart wrenching.

RG: How about social media, talking about a younger generation? How has that changed or shaped your work or the organization?

TH: Not even just with the younger generation, just in general. I just had a conversation with my board members. Even with fundraising, you're having to keep up with the new marketing streams, the new marketing techniques in terms of using social media as a means to raise money for your organization. And I'm sorry, but I'm almost fifty years old. My kids are on Instagram and all that, and I'm just getting on Facebook. And I'm already tired of that. I can't imagine keeping up with Twitter and Facebook and—

RG: That's a lot of work.

TH: And Instagram and whatever else is coming up that I don't know about and then having to do that in terms of business. I have to keep up to speed with it because you're dealing with a younger generation of donors, the Millennials that are replacing the Baby Boomers if you will. These young people who are in business and entrepreneurs and want to give, it's all about convenience. It's about let's get it done; let's get it done quickly. Donate online, send me my thank you letter online and whatever. So as an

organization we're having to adjust and adjust quickly. So we're going through some training now with my board and as well as myself to see how we can get caught up to speed with using social media in terms of offering our services, raising money for the organization, even making it convenient at some point for our clients to be able to have access to our programs online or through social media. But again it takes education too because some of our clients that we work with are not from the city. They're from like the countryside where there's no such thing as electricity, let alone a computer and how to have access to that. So we still have a lot of work to do.

RG: It's a hot topic.

TH: It really is, and we have to get on board because it's, when you're talking about technology, it's constantly evolving. I might be learning something today, but by the time I implement it, it's obsolete. It's something else so--. But we're get, we'll get there. We'll get there.

RG: Yeah, we talked about the political climate generally. And we talked about sort of the stigma around like immigration. That's not specifically on here, but that seems to sort of be, there's a distinction between refugee status but, and then I'll throw a few things on. You can choose what your--I was thinking about the like housing issues, gentrification issues, and finally Obama's our current president. So those are three things in my mind that I thought I should bring up in this interview.

TH: Well, I can say that we've been invited to be on a planning committee with the Mayor Kasim Reed Welcoming Atlanta program that's just been started about a year ago. I hope I'm saying it right. But nevertheless he is very concerned about being able to serve refugee immigrants who come to Atlanta, and Georgia in general, and them having

an opportunity towards affordable housing. And so we're on a planning committee with, addressing that affordable housing issue as it pertains to refugees in particular because there are families out there who want to buy a home that are at a place where they want to be able to purchase a home versus renting and are in the position to be able to do that. They've been working for quite some time. They've saved up some money, and they want to be able to have a home and call it their own, and so with the mayor's office we're discussing what that looks like. How do we develop affordable housing for those who are not ready to purchase a home? Does that mean that we look for opportunities in mixed income housing to help prepare or help provide a certain number of apartments where at least we could start it with that so that these families can at least be able to rent without knowing that they're low income and they need to be able to afford where they want to live. We partner with Atlanta Habitat for Humanity or the various nonprofits that provide resources like home buying seminars and budgeting classes or financial literacy or again knowing your rights and responsibilities when it comes to homeownership, having relationships with the banking systems. Maybe we can create some type of financial program where if they do not otherwise qualify for traditional loan, for a mortgage for the home, what can we put in place for those who are learning what kind of programs to help? So we're just having this discussion with the hope of being able to provide those affordable homes or housing opportunities in regards to our refugee populations.

RG: Is this area you think going to remain a place people can come and land and rent or--?

TH: I think so, but what I'm also hearing is once, for newly arrived families this is convenient because you have most of your resettlement agencies close by and you have

most of your refugee service organizations here so where they can get help. It's those who have been here for about five years or more that are ready to move outside. So they're going to Gwinnett County; they're going to, some of them are going to Savannah; some are going other places, but I'm hearing more and more that most feel like they want to leave Georgia because it's harder to have access to resources here than other states. For example there are some who say they'd rather go to, I think, Boston because it's easier to have access to resources to get your life together than it is here in the South.

RG: That's where I'm from originally. But I don't know a lot about the politics there. How about Obama, having Obama in the office, I mean in office, in the White House at the end of his term? I'm losing my own words. I'm impressed that you're—

TH: Personally I'm actually concerned—

RG: About the next presidency, yeah.

TH: Yeah. Like holding my breath because I feel like Obama worked very hard to create opportunities for minorities in general. And he has a passion for making sure those who are immigrants to this country have opportunities, and I'm really concerned about the next administration and what that looks like. What changes will they try to make? What other challenges will be facing--funding cuts for nonprofits like us. Are we going to be able to, because right now we're heavily grant funded. Is the next administration going to come in cut those funds? Because we've already faced some challenges with that. What does that mean for us if we have to close our doors or cut services when we're already underpaid as staff, and I'm having to beg for resources to keep the doors open? And people aren't giving as much as they used to to nonprofits

because everyone is struggling. So I am concerned, very concerned. But that's all in a day's work. I'll just have to figure it out, make it happen.

RG: I saw you guys have three staff?

TH: There's only three staff here.

RG: Three staff and a full board.

TH: Myself and two others. And we have a very small board. And so I'm really trying to move us away from being so heavily grant dependent and raise more private donations and corporate sponsorships because I faced too many times in the last year that I've been with the organization where we were facing funding cuts and not knowing if we're going to be able to sustain that.

RG: Is that because of Congress? Yes.

TH: Yeah.

RG: Yeah.

TH: At one point—

RG: The whim of Congress.

TH: When the focus was they were going to only focus on those children, those unaccompanied youth that were coming into the United States. That was a priority, and the rest of us service organizations that serve refugees or immigrants, our funding was going to be cut significantly to the point where it could've been up to sixty percent. And so luckily our program wasn't cut, but others have. And other programs have had to shut down and that's what keeps me up at night.

RG: There's actually a question in here—

TH: The money.

RG: That says what keeps you up at night.

TH: That, that.

RG: Which I didn't ask.

TH: That is, that's why I'm up at night always thinking about. How am I going to get the word out about the work that we do? How can I engage the community and businesses and corporations and individuals to understand how important our work is? And then how can I get them to be open minded about the populations that we work with and not be biased or prejudice? And how can I make it where they feel like they're actually a partner with us and we just don't want their money? We really want them to be a partner with us to have a hand in what we do out on a daily basis. So that's what keeps me up at night.

RG: How do you do all those things?

TH: And you see my to do list. Look at that. And this is, all those boxes—

RG: Wow. That's what I'm staring at.

TH: Work and all of this stuff. So it's constant.

RG: Well, what strategies have worked or what, how do you make it less dependent on grants?

TH: You know I think with me being a new director here, we have a new strategic plan; we have a new mission. I'm creating new, restructuring our programs, I think once we rebrand ourselves in terms of all that we're doing and what we're offering, the changes that we made, I think that we can get some community buy in. For example I talked about a microenterprise program. I want to restructure that so it's more of a women's economic development program, and microfinance is just a component under

that because not woman is ready to start a business. So we could train women about business and then for those who are ready to start a business we can help them to develop their plan and then offer them an opportunity to apply for loan. But for that woman who says I want to go back to school or I want a job or career, how are we going to help that woman be self-sufficient or self-reliant. And that will fall under workforce development or economic development to help them do that. So that's just a sample of what I'm trying to do to restructure the work that we're doing here so that we can meet every person right where they are and everyone has a place where, a place here where we can help them achieve their goals. So how do I do that, I've been blessed to have people with high level experience and expertise that would normally charge thousands and thousands of dollars for consultation volunteer their time for free to help me in this process. Now that is valuable. That's when I talk about donors and people being engaged with the organization, that's the kind of engagement I like to see. People are passionate about our mission that want to help, and we could all sit back one day and say hey, you remember and now look at the organization. It's thriving; it's sustaining. That's what I'm hoping.

RG: What do you see as the biggest challenges—oh wait no. It says facing feminists today. I'm going to back up. I covered it up, but I was thinking you're basically saying some of the biggest challenges of the work you're in. Would you say that, what are the challenges?

TH: The challenges, yeah, I pretty much said it.

RG: You said it.

TH: The challenges is I want our organization to be a global organization. Right now we're set, we're settled here in Georgia, and we're doing great work. But I don't see

why we can be like a CARE dot org or YWCA International or an organization that we have locations throughout the world. So I have my struggle or my challenge is taking baby steps because I have a visionary. And oh we're going to do this and we're going to do this by tomorrow. And I have to take baby steps, but the challenges with the funding, educating our communities and our partnering agencies and the law enforcement officials and policies and all of that, it's ongoing. But if we can get one person on our side we'll be making some strides. But I would be glad when the day comes when I can expand this organization back to where it was before when it was fully staffed, fully funded, and we had multiple, I'd like to have multiple sites. So--

RG: What years was that that it had the biggest?

TH: In the beginning. Like in the middle I would say—

RG: Late [19]90s.

TH: Late [19]90s early 2000s. So it was thriving. And then with that funding cut, the economic turnover funding was cut, and we're trying to regroup and regain all that now.

RG: Well, I'm going to turn a little bit to the feminism questions, which is this book project is about sort of that, starting in that era, the [19]90s. So if second-wave feminism was the [19]70s. Do you identify with the third-wave terminology? Why? Why not? Was does it mean to you or what's—

TH: Tell me what the third-wave terminology?

RG: It's, I'll try to answer a question. I think it's kind of trying to bring different politics to feminism that's seeing all issues of race and class and sexuality more at the center rather than just about women's issues. But I don't, so that's not sort of—basically

the question is how do you think about your work in relation to the history of the feminist movement or feminism as an idea?

TH: I think I'm a huge advocate for women because every nonprofit that I've worked with has dealt with women and girls all the way from when I was directing programs with the YWCA I was the director over their transitional housing program. And even with the Atlanta Mission, although I was working on the men's site always had a passion with working with those women recovering from addictions and domestic violence. Being in the domestic violence at large where I've worked with several of the state certified shelters as director or some type of administration position. My whole idea is to be able to empower women to recognize their worth and be able to overcome their challenges. I always say your circumstances don't dictate who you are. The circumstances are only temporary. They don't last always. But you have something within you. Every last one of you has something in us to overcome those challenges. But sometimes they can be so difficult and so blinding because you're in it so deep that you just need someone who's been there and done that to kind of guide you through that whole process, and that's what I see myself as a change agent as that advocate as that cheerleader for that person or persons.

And in terms of the work that I do, that is what I go out in the community and talk about is being able to advocate and to bring awareness about women's issues as it relates to every population that I've worked with. And so I think my role now I feel like I, hmm, I feel like I'm a change agent. I do. I try to think outside the box. And when my staff say, oh I don't know how to do this or I don't know how I'm going to do that, I tell them

you're going to have to be creative in thinking because regardless of if we have the funding or not, the work still has to be done.

And so in terms of in the past how organizations were run I think women in leadership positions in nonprofits, I still say we're underpaid in comparison to the men. That has to change. I think that one of the challenges I face working for a women's organization especially when it came to domestic violence was people automatically assumed that me or my staff, we're man bashing or we hated men or we were those feminists. But that wasn't the case. The facts speak to themselves that the majority, now we do this in my training. We tell them when I'm talking about domestic violence, we're going to say he because the majority of our abusers according to the statistics are men. And but we understand that men are victims too. But for the sake of training we'll just say he, but understand that men are abused too, and I want to make it plain and clear. But when you're doing training in like for law enforcement where the majority of the officers are men or you're presenting before a bunch of judges who enforce the law, I also have to remember how many of those judges' wives called our hotline because they were being abused. But they didn't want to leave because they were enjoying their lifestyle. They just wanted someone to talk to. So those are some of the kind of things that I face as being an advocate for women in nonprofit in this type of work is that we're often looked at as being as a woman that we despise men and that's not the case. It's just that's what the facts state. And I try to help turn that mindset around [phone buzzing] by giving, by educating, giving them some the facts, the statistics about it so that they can understand why it is we say that we do because that's what the data supports. But I also try to show

that compassionate and understanding side by giving them those other resources as well.

So—

RG: We can pause if there's anything—

TH: It's my daughter. I can call her back.

RG: Yeah, so there are a few questions about feminism sort of what are the challenges facing feminists today, facing activist organizations?

TH: I wonder if we're ever taken seriously. It's, I guess it just depends on the work you do in terms of, because I think in this role, no, domestic violence is pretty challenging. This is even more challenging because not only do I have victims of domestic violence who are refugees, but they're refugees and they're victims of domestic violence, and when you're presenting a case for them or advocating on their behalf, it's just [large sigh], it helps change laws. You're just dealing with, the people who are making the laws are primarily men. And to try to get them to understand, they'll never know what it's like to become a woman. They'll never know what it's like to be a minority woman, and they'll never know what it's like to be a minority refugee woman who happens to be a domestic violence victim or whatever issue they're facing. And so to get them to, the challenge is to get them to understand that place where that person is we're advocating for. They can't relate. They just can't. And even with the work that I'm trying to do here. I'm trying to create more of a digital storytelling. Instead of me talking about the work that we do, I want to have a digital story of a woman who we're serving tell her story--talk about how she was raped and beaten in a refugee camp, talk about she saw her husband murdered right before her eyes or her children murdered right before her eyes, having to flee through the woods barefoot, beaten and bleeding to death in order to

survive. I can't tell that story and make it believable to someone who can't understand my point of view. But maybe if they see it from someone who's been there, maybe at some point, something, they'll have that ah-ha moment where they're like okay, this is really happening and we need to do something about it. But it's always going to be a challenge, always. Because when you're talking about working or advocating for the populations that we work with to these law, policy makers and changing laws, I wonder sometimes what their agenda, personal agendas are. Do you really care about this issue that we're presenting that we need you to advocate on our behalf for for funding or resources or for laws or do I have to have a certain position in society for you to believe me? Do I have a certain amount of money for you to believe me? Do I have to some type of status in the community before you believe me? I don't know. So maybe if they hear it from the person who's been through it if they have a heart, if they're actually human, maybe it would make a difference.

RG: Are these policy people on the state level, federal level, both?

TH: All. Both.

RG: All. Yeah.

TH: Yeah.

RG: Yeah and if they're just listening at all then hearing, then doing something that's advocacy.

TH: You go to some of them and you say okay here's our issue. We want you to advocate on our behalf or present it and just kind of get the brush off like okay, okay, okay. But to have someone, my goal is to be able to capture that person's heart and get them to have an emotional connection to what's going on when they see that digital story.

Give a woman an opportunity to speak before Congress and share her experience. But the stuff that I hear on the news, those people and don't get me started on Trump but such ignorance. And—

RG: And it get some political leverage somehow.

TH: It's just disturbing. It really is.

RG: So what else would you like to discuss or address?

TH: Haven't really thought about it. I think with this project what I hope people will get out of it once the final draft of the book is written is that we all have a part or some type of social responsibility to whatever that cause may be. For me my passion is again women's issues and girls, whether it's domestic violence, working with refugee women because I felt the need to do something more of a global work. And I can't travel around the world because they don't pay me enough to do that. But I think that working with women from all over the world will have a global impact because they may be here today. They may have an influence on their daughters. Their daughters can go back home or whatever and that, whatever that seed I planted it could make a difference in the world. And so I'm hoping that with our stories that you're gathering and compile and pull together that everyone will find their niche, find what it is that pulls at them, keeps them up at night and be able to become that change agent or that advocate or that resource or that voice for those persons or that one person, those people or that one person that don't have the energy or don't have the voice or don't know how to speak or don't know how to raise help that we can do it for them, that we can be that for them.

RG: It seems like just bringing trauma into the conversation and kind of into the center of the work that's going on here is really important.

TH: I think that we talk about meeting, all of us as resource providers, we work on meeting their basic needs. But what I'm trying to do through this organization is that making sure that yeah, we can meet the basic needs. But we need to meet the internal needs as well. You can't hardly think about how you're going to pay a bill if you are still having nightmares about what just happened to you. I want to be, I want to make sure that we help stabilize the women and the children in our program to a point where they can learn to live again, laugh again, be happy again, not be consumed with the day to day activities of just having to survive in a new culture, a new country. I want them to get to a place where they have a new beginning and can enjoy it. So--

RG: And it's like creates a space, people come and meet here.

TH: I think that the women that we serve, I've had, for example back in May we had a huge celebration for the women that we serve. It wasn't nothing formal; it wasn't advertised. I just told my staff. I said, hey on Friday let's have our own international women's celebration. I want all the women that we serve to come here. We're going to provide food. We're going to dance. We're going to just have fun. Wow. So many women showed up. Different women from different cultures. They were teaching each other how to dance from their countries. We had all types of international foods here that they that prepared, they brought a dish. They were able to exchange conversations and hug each other and laugh and videotape it. They were dancing. It was so much fun, and I didn't realize how much that meant to them. I just wanted to do that for them, but it turned out that it was way more than just a party. They came to me in their different languages and other staff and other people interpreted for me, and they told me how much that meant to them that I celebrated them. And so this is a place of refuge. They

feel safe here because we're women helping women. They feel safe here because I have staff that understand the refugee experience because they've been there themselves, the immigration experience. They understand firsthand what it's like so they trust the staff because we're not telling them what they need to do. We're meeting them right where they are from our own experiences and being able to help them through the process. And the community is hearing about it and getting more and more people engaged in our programs and services because of that. And I think our reputation speaks for itself. I mean we've been here for twenty years. So we have longevity. So we have those personal, we have those great relationships where women are asking us to help them. They'd rather come here than go anywhere else because they feel like we understand. So I think that's what sets us apart from everyone else.

RG: Yeah, I don't want to hold you for too long. I mean I have nowhere to go so-. If there's anything else that you think we've sort of missed, I want to address that.

TH: I don't know. I think the questions you asked have been, I know I've talked a lot. So—

RG: Yeah.

TH: If we missed anything I'm sure it's in there somewhere.

RG: Well, we sort of I know, I think I shouldn't rustle the papers I guess. The kind of the question of feminism is and your relationship to it, you answered that question, but since it's a central thing of this book project, how do you relate to feminism?

TH: I really never thought about it. I just do what I do.

RG: Yeah.

TH: I'm one of those people that, I mean I was born in the era when they were burning the bras and all of that. I think that, I'm really not sure, I'm really not sure how to answer that. I just, I don't let anything get in my way. I don't allow anyone to put me in a box and keep me there. I've been there and done that when I was married and that didn't work. And so like just a little wild child when it comes to working with women and women's issues and just in general, I just really feel like that we as women we are, we could do anything. I mean we're not limited. We, I'm not really sure how to answer that. I heard someone say, and I could totally relate to this. I probably shouldn't say it because it might not be correct, but I just really don't-- I just haven't thought about it; I just do it.

RG: There's no pressure.

TH: Yeah, I just think that—

RG: We can come back around to it.

TH: I think that as a woman I can carry a baby for nine months; I can give birth; I can manage my household; I can manage my children; I can manage my career; I can be-- . I mean I just in terms of feminism, I just don't, I don't allow anyone to put me in a box and keep me there. That's all I can say. I fought so hard in my own upbringing watching my mom and grandmother and aunts struggle in their own homes and not being free to be who they are that I just cannot permit that in the work that I do or in my personal life. That if I see that something needs to be done regardless if it's a, of what it is, I go after it. Regardless of what the challenges are I go after it. I don't care if I'm speaking before the President of the United States or president of a corporation and they're both male, or I hold my own. And if I'm passionate about a subject or an opportunity or an issue, I'm going to talk about it. I'm going to stress the importance about whatever it is that I'm

discussing. I'm going come up with solutions and expect a plan of action. So when I talk about feminism, I don't know if I'm making myself clear enough, but maybe I need you to rephrase it for me. I don't know.

RG: I think that you're saying, I mean you're a very impressive person in the world. You're pushing people to where they need to be at. Saying I'm not going to be—I mean the book is titled *Speaking Up, Speaking Out*. That's not being in a box. That's which is what society, there's a lot of pressure on girls and men.

TH: There is a lot of pressure of girls and women to fit into a mold. I think what bothers me is when I see girls and women, I have a daughter. And she's beautiful and she's gorgeous. But things happened to her in her young age. She was victimized. And I've seen her being held back because of her victimization and not being able to see her potential or being afraid to reach her potential, even try, and I've tried everything. But sometimes as a mother, your children don't listen to you. It takes someone else to work with them because oh she's just mom. But now she's turning twenty-five, and I've seen her grown so much over the last several years and now she's getting, she's getting it. And it's a beautiful thing to see her blossom and overcome the victimization that she had when she was younger and realize that she is a woman and that she has a right to understand what it and go after the things she wants in life and not have to live by other person's standards. Not even mine. I said even, I'm your mom and even as a woman I want you take the advice that I give you but create it in your life however you want to use it. You don't have to, it's your life. You be the captain of your ship. And that's what I try to show them through leaving that bad relationship with their dad and having to go through so many struggles that I've had to go through to accomplish what I've

accomplished, but they never see me bow down or jump ship or comply to anyone else's standards. I am the captain of my ship, of my boat. It's my life. I've only got one shot. And I choose to make a difference in other people's lives as the captain of my ship because I want to take other people on board and drive them to a place where they can land and begin living the life that they want to achieve and be the captain of their ship because I didn't get here by myself. It took a lot of people to pray for me and to cry with me and to be there for me and to help me see my potential.

So when I think about today's standards of how our young people are growing up, it kind of ticks me off to see women thinking that it's okay to the young girls thinking it's okay to twerk and to degrade yourself. Even some of the lyrics on the radio, one lyric I heard was how long was it going to take that B-I-T-C-H to come over. I don't know who sings that song—so he can have sex with her. And then I see the girls. Oh that's my song. They're dancing out there. He just called her a bitch. How are you comfortable with that? How is it that the highest level of standard you have for yourself is to be on a video half-dressed or to be, to twerk and think that you're going to get some respect? What is your value? What are you looking at? What are you doing? When we look at, when I look at that, I get upset because these are the people that's going to take care of me when I get old. So the only thing you want to do in life is to find a baby daddy, be half naked on TV somewhere or strip somewhere and I'm not down on women with that, that's their goal then that's their goal. But I see more in that person than that. And I want them to see that.

I guess I'm that way because through all the women that have worked who have been victimized, some of them were degrading themselves to the point where I can't see a woman. I can't tolerate a woman thinking less than herself than what, when she's so

much more valuable than that because all her life when that victimization whether she was molested as a child or grew up in a relationship where she was raped and beaten and now she's resorting to this because that's all she thinks and normal for her. I can't allow her to stay there. I have to bring her up. And so that's just my stance on lifting my sister up to a level in her life where she can be free to be who she wants to be and live a life that she wants to live and have access to the resources to be able to do that whether starting a business or running a Fortune 500, 400 company or whatever. So I may have been rambling and said a whole lot—

RG: Oh it's the things out in the world that we're, what's in a music video is what you absorb of the world and what's going around you.

TH: Yeah, and then I see too--

RG: It's relevant.

TH: I see two or three year olds who can't say their ABCs, but they know the lyrics of these degrading songs, and the parents are letting them dance to it think it's cute. No. It's not. So--.

RG: So it's big and small issues. But it seems like you're really, your life's work is also what you're doing with your own life in different communities.

TH: Yeah, I just want the women that I work with on a day to day basis understand again their potential. That they're smart; that they're beautiful; they're brilliant; they're creative; they're strong; they're resourceful; that they, that's just my goal just to let them understand that and it's okay to cry. It's okay to feel weak and vulnerable because that's actually a strength. If you didn't recognize that, I would be concerned. But the fact that you can cry about something shows you're human. You have

these emotions and that you can be angry about something. That means you're human and you have these emotions. But let's channel it into a way where you can be creative with it, put it in some type of context or some direction where you can accomplish something through it. Yeah. So that's where I stand.

RG: Powerful. Yeah. Well, I like that you have "Expect miracle, inspire" behind you. It's like amplify what you're saying. But yeah, I mean I think, I don't want to, I think we're, we've covered what I want to cover.

TH: Okay. Well, if there's anything else that comes up that you want me to—

RG: Yeah, there always is.

TH: Answer just call me or email me and I'll be glad to give my input. And if something comes to mind I'll say I thought about this and I'll just send it to you as well.

RG: Yeah, yeah. I think the work that this organization is doing and pulling you in as executive director to kind of create those connections between different experiences of being a woman experiencing trauma, having, being a minority, being in a new place, it's, you have a lot of to bring to the table about what it's like to be in that role of sort of being in between.

TH: We have a lot of work ahead of us, but we're going to get there one step at a time. I have to just control myself.

RG: You have to wait for the steps. Yeah.

TH: I just have to, I have to work on pacing myself, but yeah, we'll get there.

RG: Well, I'm going to end the tape and I'm sure we'll—

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by LM Altizer, September 24, 2015