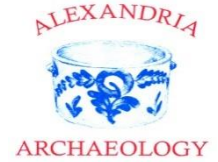




City of Alexandria
Office of Historic Alexandria
Alexandria Legacies
Oral History Program



Project Name: *Immigrant Alexandria: Past, Present, and Future*

Title: *Interview with Jonathan "Jon" Liss*

Date of Interview: *April 14, 2015*

Location of Interview: *Mr. Liss's office in Alexandria, Virginia*

Interviewer: *John Reibling*

Audio and Video Recording: *Rebecca Siegal*

Transcriber: *John Reibling*

Abstract: Jonathan Liss was born December 11, 1958, in Brooklyn, New York. He has lived in Northern Virginia since he was approximately five years old. During the interview he recalls his childhood and ongoing work as a community organizer and advocate for immigrants and low-wage workers. He speaks passionately about causes such as affordable housing, workers' rights, police violence, and voter rights in both Alexandria and the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Table of Contents/Index

Minute	Page	Topic
01:15	3	Introductions
02:28	3	Childhood
06:52	5	University of Virginia
09:00	6	Early Work Experiences
14:48	8	Move to Arlandria
17:46	9	Layton Estates
21:22	10	The Takeover of City Council Chambers
26:49	12	Tenants Support Committee
31:21	14	Workers' Rights
37:11	15	Latino Youth Issues
40:39	17	Murals Created by Youth
44:22	18	Committee Against Police Violence
51:22	21	New Virginia Majority
54:21	22	Work with Other Immigrant Communities
56:57	23	Major Issues Still Facing Immigrants
58:46	23	Concluding Questions

Introductions	
John Reibling:	Today is April 14, 2015, and we are interviewing Mr. Jon Liss, long-time advocate and community organizer in Northern Virginia. He is currently the Co-Executive Director of New Virginia Majority and Executive Director of Tenants and Workers United. This interview is being recorded at his office on Mount Vernon Avenue [3801 Mount Vernon Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia] as part of the City of Alexandria's [Immigrant Alexandria] Past, Present and Future Oral History Project. I am John Reibling, a volunteer with the City's Office of Historic Alexandria. Assisting me today behind the camera is Ms. Becca Siegal.
Jon Liss:	You want the window shut? I'm just worried about that noise.
J.R.:	Done in a minute?
Jon Liss:	Let me shut it at least partially.
J.R.:	Okay.
Jon Liss:	Otherwise I feel the trash truck driving in our room. [Sound of shutting window] Little better. I don't know.
J.R.:	Yeah.
Jon Liss:	Sorry about that.
Childhood	
J.R.:	So, Jon, to get started I'd like to ask you a few questions regarding your childhood. Tell us—let's see, you were born in Brooklyn, New York.
Jon Liss:	[cutting in] I was born yes—no [laughs].
J.R.:	You were born in Brooklyn, New York?
Jon Liss:	That's right. I was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1958.
J.R.:	Okay and then you wound up in Falls Church—you were just a baby at that time?
Jon Liss:	I think I was about five years old—four or five, something like that. Five years old probably.
J.R.:	So what was it like growing up in Falls Church in the [19]70s and [19]80s?
Jon Liss:	Or actually at that point it would have been the [19]60s, right?
J.R.:	Sixties.
Jon Liss:	Umm, honestly, I was five years old. I don't remember that much. We were renting a suburban tract house there. It was right near Falls Church. I just remember there was a creek in the backyard, or, not in the backyard but within walking distance. So I remember splashing around in the water and finding stuff. That's about all—I don't have that many memories—and we

	had a Boston terrier as a dog so I remember chasing the dog cause it would escape periodically and chase cars.
J.R.:	And you had two sisters? [Cathy Liss, currently of Annandale, Virginia, and Julie Liss, currently of Harrisonburg, Virginia]
Jon Liss:	I had two sisters—not at that point, but eventually. Yeah, one sister is a year and a half younger and the other sister is ten years younger.
J.R.:	Okay. So what did you do for fun as a kid besides splash in the creek?
John Liss	Ah—I mean I liked to read, like to play chess, I like to play basketball, like to ride a bicycle. Those are the kinds of things I like to do.
J.R.:	Great. So could you tell us a little about your parents [Stuart and Judith Liss]? What brought them to Falls Church?
Jon Liss:	Sure. My mother, I think, was the first one in her family to go to college, Brooklyn College, and then married my dad, who eventually became an architect. At one point he was running a go-cart track in Long Island, which I don't have any recollection of it, except that when the go-track went out of business he did keep one of the go-carts. So I grew up with a—wherever we were, we always toted around a go-cart, so that was my first driving experiences or experience. So they moved down here in [the] early [19]60s basically in search of work. Ah—again the go-cart business wasn't much of a business and my Dad had now, by then, been trained as an architect, and so he came down here to work as a draftsman and eventually as an architect. And my mother worked as a social worker, worked as an educator and then ran a catering business. I don't know if the IRS [Internal Revenue Service] is listening but [she] ran a catering business out of the basement.
J.R.:	[Laughs] Were they politically active?
Jon Liss:	I think my mother had been active in the Adlai Stevenson stuff back in the late [19]50s. And then, you know, I think they voted, but they weren't like—and maybe went to a few protests here and there around a woman's right to choose, choice, and women's health issues, and equal rights, different things like that. So they went to some marches, my mom more so than my dad, but I wouldn't call them like, not like me. [laughs] They didn't do it like every week but they'd do it every now and then.
J.R.:	Any memorable childhood events that are noteworthy?
Jon Liss:	I broke a number of bones playing sports and running around, so at one point I was breaking a bone like almost every year, once a year around Friday the 13th. It was a—I actually started believing in Friday the 13th [was] bad luck at that point. I actually broke about three or four bones in a row. Yeah, it was a good childhood. You know—loving family. Went, in high school, walked to elementary school. Like today you hear the controversy about “free range” children. I remember walking a mile to school, ya know, through suburbs basically—and ya know went from age

	<p>six on. I mean it's sort of amazing nowadays that would be considered child abuse. So that it's, ya know, a number of local friends, even though we lived in Northern Virginia, which has a lot of government workers, for some reason our neighborhood had a number of people that actually didn't move out every two or three years but actually stuck around. So we had a lot of government workers and other folks around. What I learned later [was] anybody who said they worked for the State Department were probably working for the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]. But [laughs] you live and learn. Anyway, so it was a good childhood, good neighborhood, good schools. I enjoyed myself, had a lot of friends.</p>
<p>University of Virginia</p>	
J.R.:	<p>Then you went on to the University of Virginia. Were you politically active on campus?</p>
Jon Liss:	<p>By my sophomore/junior year, yeah, I was very active I think by my sophomore year. I started getting active and by [my] junior year I was pretty much doing it full-time. Students—I had to study a little bit, had to take a few tests, write a few papers, but really that was secondary to sort of the organizing that I was doing.</p>
J.R.:	<p>So what kinds of organizations and events were you involved in then?</p>
Jon Liss:	<p>The first year would have been—it was on international stuff as then President Jimmy Carter was reintroducing the draft. So we organized, ya know, a lot of people did to try and prevent the draft and sort of forcing folks into the Army. After that—we created multiple-year campaign around two things, really one was—creation of an African-American Studies Department at the University of Virginia and secondly was divestment from South African-related stocks. So it was a combination of that nationwide divestment movement in the early [19]80s as well as demanding locally African-American Studies be fully, ya know, given full rights and privileges of all the other departments.</p>
J.R.:	<p>And what were you studying then?</p>
Jon Liss:	<p>I ended up with a history degree.</p>
J.R.:	<p>What got you involved in advocacy-type work? Do you have a sense of what drew you to it?</p>
Jon Liss:	<p>In a weird way I think going to the University of Virginia, which had a—the dominant culture was very conservative, you know, the whole—even this day you read about fraternities and the abuse of women and sort of that sort of a—I would say it was my first exposure to sort of Southern aristocracy and all that—so a finishing school for a lot of the plantation-owner wealthy class from across the South. So that was sort of an alienating experience in a certain way. But also liberating in that there was at least a core of professors and friends that we could sit around and talk about this stuff and then to start, ya know, scheming and developing</p>

	alternatives.
Early Work Experiences	
J.R.:	So what sorts of jobs did you hold after graduating from college?
Jon Liss:	<i>After</i> graduating from college—.
J.R.:	Well <i>during</i> if you had jobs—.
Jon Liss:	Yeah, I had jobs. My first job was, well, I was cutting grass at age thirteen. [laughs] So I used to cut grass. I remember it was like three bucks a lawn. That's how—it wasn't much but I was saving up to buy a bicycle. And then eventually my first, like, paycheck job was at Roy Rogers, which was a fast food restaurant. Yeah, you—noted for wearing, like, cowboy shirts with a cowboy hat. So that was, like, sort of the gimmick they had. I worked there for a couple of years. Ended up working at Safeway for the last two years of high school and then throughout college I would come back and work most summers at Safeway. It paid pretty well. And then when I—winters I would work at Manpower, Inc., so I had a number of—Manpower, Inc., you know you're shipped out to wherever they sent you, so I had a range of some of the funniest and some of the worst jobs I've ever had in my life. [laughs] They were all short-term, but I did that and then [after] graduating I worked—you want me to roll through that?
J.R.:	Sure.
Jon Liss:	<p>After graduating I worked—friends and I created like a nonprofit fund-raising entity to help local groups raise money and we would keep a percentage to keep us going. So I did that for about a year after I graduated. We traveled up and down the East Coast. Really, what we were glorified wheatpasters [term for artists and activists who put posters on public walls as a form of advertising]. We'd paste, like, wallpaper. We'd put up posters, advertising the movie—we were showing a movie called <i>1984</i>, this is 1983, so it was a 1956 movie with Michael Redgrave, blah blah blah. But it was <i>1984</i>, based on George Orwell's book, so we had a three—one of those three-stage [posters] like Burma Shave—we had like a three-stage advertising campaign and we'd wheatpaste these different posters, one different poster for each week. So we did that up and down the East Coast from Boston to Athens, Georgia.</p> <p>It was going pretty well until an ice storm came and we lost three cars in a week. And we were undercapitalized as many new businesses were and so I ended up back in Northern Virginia. I'd moved back from New York for a period of time and became a taxi driver. Basically it was a cash business, nice, so I was playing poker. You could make little bit of money but enough to pay your bills [laughs]. So I was driving a cab. Drove cab for about eighteen months maybe close to two years. Was fired for organizing drivers and ended up being a courier which in the [19]80s was still a vibrant or as-new business, that actually you would carry packages, real</p>

	<p>estate plans, contract settlements, all that kind of stuff. You would carry it from one business to the other, maybe get a signature and return it, that kind of stuff. Eventually the fax, and the scanner, and all that pretty much wiped out that industry. But in the [19]80s, it was a boom industry and a number of the drivers who'd been fired from the taxi industry ended up at this courier company. So I did that for a couple of years while a we were creating, well basically building, a movement, to the extent we could call it a movement, here in Arlandria and Alexandria, and the good thing about the courier job was you could work—you were an independent contractor. The bad thing was you were an independent contractor and you had no benefits and no guaranteed income. And the good thing was you were an independent contractor and could take off whenever you wanted to. So I was able to basically help create the infrastructure that became this organization, Tenants and Workers United. And so by somewhere—[19]89—after bopping around for five or six years with, ya know, basically doing taxi and a bunch of odd sort of stuff like that, I ended up getting paid to be to be community organizer and eventually Executive Director for Tenants and Workers United.</p>
J.R.:	You've covered a lot of ground here. I just have one follow-up question.
Jon Liss:	Sure, not a problem. I wasn't sure you wanted the whole list of jobs I could give you. I mean I had other jobs along the way I could tell you some—I worked for the CIA for one week even.
J.R.:	Wow.
Jon Liss:	Yeah. That was their mistake. [laughs] No it was they had a moving company in the basement, so we sat in the basement of the CIA and the phone would ring, and while we're drinking Guinness beer and playing darts all day, the phone would ring and we would have to move some file cabinet, we'd run like a fire drill and move the cabinet, go back downstairs, drink beer, and play darts.
J.R.:	[Laughs]
Jon Liss:	It was a great job to tell you the truth. It only lasted a week. It was Manpower, Inc.
J.R.:	So just a follow up question. You mentioned divestment. How did you get involved in the Apartheid movement?
Jon Liss:	The <i>anti</i> -Apartheid movement. I think again being at UVA—the University of Virginia—and the sort of class structure there and the racial structure there. I can't remember what year, but it hadn't admitted women until the early [19]70s, and it hadn't admitted African-Americans until the late [19]60s. Something like that, I don't remember exact dates. But the point is, pretty well-developed sort of racist/sexist atmosphere, and so that was sort of both alienating, and like I said earlier, liberating, and the more you sort of dug into what was going on and how the world worked and all the

	more I felt compelled to take action and do something about it. And so we—ya know, South Africa at that point was—it was the first wave of anti-Apartheid work and we sort of got plugged into it. And least from my point of view that we link it with a local or university manifestation of essentially institutional racism, and that to us was how African-American Studies was treated less, less than a department compared to other departments.
Move to Arlandria	
J.R.:	Great. And when did you move to Arlandria?
Jon Liss:	So we—I can tell you—well, I move to Alexandria in [19]80—I think it was [19]86, might have been [19]87. Essentially—it was probably right around [19]87—we had protested at City Hall—then Mayor Jim Moran—he later became a Congressperson—sort of got into my face about, well, you don't even live here, when I gave testimony at City Hall. And I said something like, "Look, I'm a tenant, currently I'm renting a place in Falls Church, but tomorrow I could be your neighbor. You just never know." So after that I felt like—the gauntlet had been thrown down—it was sort if I was going to be organizing here, it was important to live in Alexandria, so when our lease expired we moved to Alexandria and found a place initially right over near East Alexandria, right near the sort of industrial end of East Alexandria.
J.R.:	You mentioned "we." We haven't talked about your [wife] Vicky [Victoria "Vicky" Menjiver].
Jon Liss:	Yeah. I met Vicky—I was a taxi driver, she was a passenger. She was from El Salvador. We met—Vicky Menjiver—and we ended up getting married relatively shortly thereafter we met, you know, within a year. That would have been—I'd have to count all the years but it was about [19]86ish—we'll say I'd have to go back—well actually I think [19]85 cause I'm going back through the years I think this year is our thirtieth, thirtieth. So we married—no kids for a long time—and two kids born in [19]95 and then [19]97, respectively.
J.R.:	Okay. And she was coming—came here from San Salvador?
Jon Liss:	Yes, she was from San Salvador. She was a maid and I was a taxi driver, so that's where we met.
J.R.:	And she was fleeing the conflict? [Civil War in El Salvador, 1980–1992]
Jon Liss:	Yeah, yeah, as she described it—they were literally washing the blood off the streets with a fire hose—in San Salvador after public demonstrations—not even in the middle of actual battle but during public demonstrations.
J.R.:	Okay. And you lived first in Warwick Village?
Jon Liss:	No, I first lived—we rented a place—530 East Alexandria—it was like at the end of East Alexandria right next to like the warehouse right there at the end. We rented a place there for, oh, probably pushing five or six years.

J.R.:	And what was that neighborhood like?
Jon Liss:	Then the neighborhood—I still think it was fairly affordable, so our neighborhood was working folks, probably at least one third African-American, not many Latinos, particularly in that neighborhood, but even outside of Arlandria there weren't many Latinos at that point in Alexandria. Kids in the street running up and down. We would play with them, you know. Grocery store within walking distance. Braddock Road Metro, a little bit of a hike, but not too far away.
Layton Estates	
J.R.:	In 1986 John Freeman and Conrad Cafritz—.
Jon Liss:	<i>Cafritz</i> [pronounces name with a long “a” sound.
J.R.:	Cafritz, developers, bought Layton Estates in hopes of redeveloping the area. Layton was one of the largest low-income housing developments in Northern Virginia. Can you talk about what was happening in Arlandria/Chirilagua at that time?
Jon Liss:	<p>Sure. Rolling it back—so, Arlandria was mostly made up of apartments after World War II. Initially, cause Alexandria was starkly segregated, it was white working-class people, primarily lower-level, or entry-level government workers. By—at a certain point—it was a flood zone too, so the good thing about floods is it keeps prices low. No one wants to live here [laughs]. The bad thing is every couple years if you live in the first or second floor you would lose most of your belongings. So at a certain point after Hurricane Agnes, which I think was [19]73 [Hurricane Agnes occurred in 1972], the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers put in—and local and federal government—put in a forty-million dollar flood control project for Four Mile Run.</p> <p>And all of a sudden this land became much more valuable. Also, that was another wave of sort of rapidly rising housing prices—gentrification and so—the City's view of Arlandria was that it was a good opportunity to redevelop and move out the poor people. Move out African-Americans, move out Latinos, and some white working-class folks that were still here from the earlier sort of wave of settlement. And so that's where we got involved in that whole fight. I was trying to prevent the mass evictions that were scheduled.</p> <p>The Layton Estates—Stanley Layton passed, his brother controlled it. I can't remember—one Layton died and Stanley, I think, was the brother who controlled it and they had to sell the property. So we knew that was going to happen and then we were trying to organize the residents and the best organizing that ever happened was when the landlord gave out notices that everybody needed to move. We ended up having a meeting in a one-bedroom apartment that had over a hundred people in the room and then snaking out into the hallway and out into the courtyard 'cause there was—</p>

	everybody was ready to do something.
J.R.:	Do you remember where that was?
Jon Liss:	Sure it was in Jacob T. Hughes's house on Florence Drive. He was—I'm guessing mid-eighties, like 85-year-old African-American guy who had worked in Alexandria as an ice picker. Alexandria was a railroad trans-shipment port between the North and the South, so produce back before refrigerated cars—you had to come by here and get ice dropped into your railcars. So he'd worked for years as an ice picker, whatever—that's what he told me. So he had offered his house. The initial meetings were mostly African-American tenants who sort of were schooled in struggle and come out of both union and civil rights struggles. And he was really clear about the Latino folks there needed to sort of step it up, and we had that meeting at his house and we hadn't anticipated—obviously we would have done something bigger if we had thought a hundred and something people were going to show up. So everybody showed up and sort of the rest is history that we'll continue to talk about.
J.R.:	Do you remember what date that was?
Jon Liss:	No I wouldn't know what date it was [laughs].
J.R.:	What year?
Jon Liss:	Umm—I think people got their eviction notices in late [19]86 so it would have been somewhere in late [19]86. I'll say October, November, maybe early December.
The Takeover of City Council Chambers	
J.R.:	Tell us a little about the takeover of City Council Chambers in 1987 to raise awareness of the plight of the residents there.
Jon Liss:	Yeah, I'm thinking it's February—I'm guessing February 21, 1987. We had planned a march. We were calling for without eminent domain. The City has the power to seize property in the public good. Often it's used to build highways, particularly through black communities. And our view, and actually, a law was clear that it could be used to seize property to preserve affordable housing, which is a public good. So our contention was the residents were paying plenty of rent to afford the apartments. You could actually convert to resident ownership for essentially the same price as what the residents were paying as rent and you could fairly compensate the Layton Estate, which was the owner. The City was not moving in that direction. They were, like I said earlier, they had floated tax-exempt bonds and all these different development schemes that were going to effectively move everybody out. So we organized a march—some people had connection then—sort of famous in the D.C. [Washington, District of Columbia] area—Mitch Snyder was a, sort of, a homeless advocate in D.C. They now have—the homeless shelter is named after Mitch. And so Mitch offered to help out [sound of Jon Liss's hand hitting table] and we were

doing organizing and we did a march from Arlandria to City Hall. That's a couple-mile march. It was pretty cool. We marched through the public housing projects, which are now being destroyed in another wave of gentrification, right through, you know, the Houston Center near Old Town, and picked up even more people, 'cause people—even in the mid to late [19]80s—people were aware of, sort of the class and race war in terms of people, you know. Low-income people being pushed out of the City. So we ended up with a couple hundred people, maybe 250 people at City Hall.

We did speeches outside and they saw us—they meaning the City Council—and quickly went into adjournment. They were going to have a lunch break and so—this was the part that—I mean it was our march. We had organized it, meaning the Tenants and Workers United or one of the predecessor organizations. But Mitch goes on the microphone and had the idea that “They're out of that room, let's go on in there.” It wasn't planned or premeditated. And so we marched in, up the stairs, up the elevator, and took over—ya know the room was basically empty. We took it over. We had a whole bunch of people sitting up, homeless and other people, sitting up at the dais, eating crackers and sodas or whatever the City Council members have. And, ya know, Council came back—I think irate would be a word. I don't know—they weren't very happy. And then Mitch and then Mayor Moran got into a shouting match, finger-pointing jabbing thing, and then shortly thereafter I think the only time, not even during the Revolutionary War, they actually cancelled a City Council meeting or they adjourned permanently for that day.

So that—the good thing was it put this community, meaning Arlandria, it put this community, meaning Latino new residents of Alexandria, on the—on the political map. I think for a number of these years there's both respect and hate, which made it both good—you get certain things done for people down here and with people down here. But it also made it difficult to get other things done. So our next sort of effort, just to give a quick example, was, and I'm probably glad we didn't get this, but we were trying to get a fifteen thousand dollar grant, from CDBG, Community Development Block Grant money, to essentially look for Code violations and housing violations to make sure that people in Arlandria lived in safe and sanitary housing, and we were the right organization. We had the connections with the community. In fact we were made up of community members. And we were slated to get that money and then we put out a pamphlet which cited the 16th Census Tract Committee and that—Alexandria's history of racism—and it cited the 16th Census Tract—at that point initially successful law suit against the City for displacement. [The City was] basically building Route One through the heart of the black community as well as wiping out black homeowners to create public housing and/or urban redevelopment. And so we cited that stuff and—I'll never forget it. I got a call from Jim Moran at home saying, “Well we were going to get you this money, but that pamphlet—that's going to be a problem.” And sure enough

	I never knew a pamphlet would be a problem, but they literally put it up on the screen—I think it was an overhead projector at that point—you know the old school transparency thing, and literally went line by line on a pamphlet that we put together. It was a pretty nice pamphlet actually [laughter]. Pretty accurate too.
J.R.:	Do you still have a copy of it?
Jon Liss:	That I can't guarantee, maybe but if I do, I don't know where it is. But it was a good pamphlet. But it was all based on actual, like, citations, posts elsewhere, analysis of the laws on affordable housing, et cetera. But of course we didn't get the funding. The good thing is—the good thing is—I always look at the good and the bad here—the good thing is by not receiving that small grant we were completely independent from the City, and over the years we've received at best minimal funding from the City for virtually anything we've done. The one exception being the building that we're sitting in today, after a multiple-year campaign the City did give us a 99-year low-interest loan. So if somebody's watching this tape in about the year, you know, two thousand and one hundred and something, don't remind them that we probably owe them money at that point [laughter].
Tenants Support Committee	
J.R.:	So it is in 1989 that you establish the Tenants Support Committee to help convert apartments to a cooperative called the Arlandria-Chirilagua Housing Cooperative [3910 Bruce Street, Alexandria].
Jon Liss:	[Interjecting] You're doing better there. You pronounced that one right [laughter].
J.R.:	Thank you. How did that idea emerge? How was it funded, what were the major issues that the organization and residents were facing?
Jon Liss:	Sure. And I've been giving a lot of longer answers. I can go shorter too—I'm trying to get your sense of pacing or what makes sense for you.
J.R.:	I've got up to two hours.
Jon Liss:	Okay. Good. I think we were, we were not incorporated in 1987. We had no staff in 1987. I was still a courier part-time in 1987 and coming here in the evenings doing meetings, et cetera et cetera, and there was a number of places that we would organize tenants when we'd get the call. We'd show up and organize and try to put pressure on the owner. Legally in Virginia there is little protection—there's a thing called "voluntary rent control" or rent guidelines—it'd be like having—speeding—if traffic speed limits were voluntary, you would have a helluva mess. Well that's the way tenants were protected. They had guidelines. So there was massive rent increases that violated all the guidelines. And so we were looking for how do we deal with this. It was either "A," go to the State level and change the entire laws of the State, which we didn't—as a neighborhood group—didn't think we had much capacity to do that, or, we had to move toward resident

	<p>ownership and that's we decided to do. We—we called it “the politics of permanence” and that residents who live here, who essentially were paying the rent, the rent is enough to pay the mortgage. They should actually own this and have full ownership stake, equity, cooperative ownership. We landed on cooperative ownership as a collective form of ownership. And so, of the couple thousand units of housing that were given eviction—this was back in late [19]86—there was a whole process with lawsuits and all delaying the planned evictions—we went after what ultimately turned out to be about 300 of those units, owned by Conrad Cafritz and John Freeman. We put pressure on them for a number of years. They went into bankruptcy, or yeah, basically bankruptcy in [19]89 and, really, whatever, ten short years, or eight short years later residents had control.</p> <p>So from—I think it was like 1997—so it was basically from eviction notices in [19]87 or [19]86 to 1996 or [199]7 resident ownership of it, ya know, of the apartments. Three hundred of the apartments now valued in 2015 dollars, hmmm, 15 to 18 million dollars. Three hundred units, still very affordable but, ya know, prices have gone up, but it's still way more affordable than anything else in the neighborhood and has a mix of one-, two-, and three-bedroom apartments.</p>
<p>J.R.:</p>	<p>You must be very proud of that accomplishment.</p>
<p>Jon Liss:</p>	<p>Yeah it was a good effort. You know we really—I learned a lot doing it. It was a good sort of intellectually fulfilling. But it was also politically fulfilling in the sense of so many folks from the neighborhood stepped up, both allies from local churches, local housing advocates or agencies, local unions, and then of course the people from the neighborhood really ran the campaigns so—and we were able to sustain it. I think the hardest thing is—they call it now “grit”—it's got a name. But it's like building it to sort of stick with something over a period of time is often what you need for success and I think we had a lot of grit both me individually but really the entire community and in a certain sense and so we stuck with it for ten years and went from eviction notices to resident ownership.</p>
<p>J.R.:</p>	<p>And GRIT was an acronym?</p>
<p>Jon Liss:</p>	<p>Yeah—it's the ability—it's a new—if you go to one of these TED Talks and type in “grit” a woman named something I think Duckworth [Angela Lee Duckworth, “The Key to Success? Grit,” April 3, 2013] wrote—did a talk on it just recently—but it's basically grit is the ability to—which is a greater sort of indicator for success than even intelligence—which is basically the ability to stick toward your goals over a long period of time and sort of grind forward. So, on a good level we had grit, both myself individually and us collectively, and we were able to sort of grind through and outlast the developer and end up with resident ownership. And we've done that with other campaigns, so I think it's a hallmark of Tenants and Workers United. I think it's a personal trait that I try and, you know, now that I know what it's called [laughter], I try to cultivate.</p>

Workers' Rights	
J.R.:	<p>So what were the issues that you saw in regards to workers' rights in Alexandria, especially for Central American refugees, immigrants in the neighborhood, during the late [19]80s and [19]90s, namely, in the hotel and restaurant work. Has this situation changed?</p>
Jon Liss:	<p>Short answer is, not very much or just a little bit in terms of how it's changed. People were discriminated against in terms of—told not to speak their language on the job in some cases, paid very low or less than living wages, fired for no or any reason, with no recourse. Essentially all the things that a union would give you or that you would expect is sort of a right of a human being growing up in the United States were denied folks. And, ya know, working people didn't speak English as a first language, if at all, and poor and immigrants, in some cases undocumented, were sort of at the margins there and hotel owners took advantage of it and the tourist industry took advantage of it. So we had a Workers Congress.</p> <p>The other thing was there was a relative vacuum of organizing in Alexandria and really in Northern Virginia. So, we were the people who ended up—any issue that happened in the neighborhood ended up on our door. So if a cop beat up somebody, they were, ya know, on Friday, they were at our door. Saturday, they were at our door. On Monday morning. If workers were not paid for work they completed, they were at our door. If workers were fired, they were at our door. So we had our Workers Congress—honestly can't tell you what year it was, would have been in the [19]90s. I'm guessing like [19]95, [19]96. You might have better information than me. The Workers Congress—number of people came together from different sectors.</p> <p>As is often the case the strongest leaders were women involved in the housekeeping departments of area hotels. So we basically tried to organize by sector. Men were more skittish and mercurial, sort of came and went, but women in the housekeeping departments in many cases had already been there for five, ten years, already had worked a long time and were getting a pittance and were being poorly treated to boot. And so we started organizing hotel by hotel 'cause the unions weren't really doing much out here. The hotel and restaurant workers union wasn't doing much. And so we marched and we targeted owners and we targeted owners' homes and we leafleted. We did the whole sort of basic corporate campaigns. We were covered on TV. Covered by national Latino papers, papers, a TV show. Ultimately had a Human Rights hearing on working conditions. The narrow construction of what is "human rights" in Alexandria and Virginia, and really most of the United States, is you really have to consciously discriminate based on national origin or protected category. Our view is if you—in other words, if you treat everybody equally bad, but bad that's legal, and that's what was happening. So they weren't discriminating. They weren't treating this one worse. They were treating all—but miserably.</p>

	<p>So we put pressure—two funny—well one—two funny marches—one was we had a picket in front of Holiday Inn, which to this day—now it’s got a fancier name I think it’s Hotel Monaco down in Old Town. And [it] was built with public housing authority sort of revenue bonds, publicly financed if you will—and they would have a happy hour for dogs. So, we had a picket outside the hotel demanding that the workers be treated like dogs, cause the dogs were actually treated better. So that was one thing that I thought was sort of funny [laughter]. A second thing was because workers—the women in the housekeeping departments were basically afraid of—well-founded fear—of being fired for being cited for exercising democratic rights. If you were on your off time and marching in Old Town you could be fired if you were spotted by a company spy or by, you know, the company manager, whoever. And so it looked like I’m dating myself, it looked like the Blues Brothers like the movie or John Belushi—we had everybody wearing dark sunglasses and baseball hats and we ended up picketing—in some cases wigs—and we did a picket up and down King Street from hotel to hotel one time so that was sort of funny. When you look at the pictures they all looks like we were a rock band or something.</p> <p>So that was good and in the end I think we secured a number of raises. We secured better treatment around not being able to speak—not being permitted to speak Spanish. Ya know, they—for during the time the most active period of the campaign they’d give the workers free lunch. They give workers free lunch, which they never do otherwise. In a couple cases we were able to help bring in a union where they were able to get contracts so workers were actually treated structurally better. They had a permanent—or at least a semi-permanent sort of guaranteed better income. And so we did that for a number of years. The hotel workers—it’s hard given the legal structure and the power of the owners to do too much here in Virginia, and also unions, quite frankly, hotel workers union, tended to use Virginia as a bargaining chip. So if we were organizing here they would tell the owner of the same hotel in Washington that, we’ll shut down the Virginia stuff if you give us a better deal in Washington. So it was difficult working with the union. It was difficult—during this time you also have a consolidation of the industry, which went from locally owned by and large to bigger and bigger chains or national ownership or national hotel groups like Starwood, et cetera. So it makes it much harder to organize at that scale. I mean basically the industry, just like real estate was becoming globalized—first nationalized—it went from regional to national to global, in terms of who you’re fighting. So, it’s harder if you’re one isolated local group.</p>
<p>Latino Youth Issues</p>	
<p>J.R.:</p>	<p>So, I’ve got a number of questions, you’ve been busy [laughter].</p>
<p>Jon Liss:</p>	<p>I’ll start going faster cause otherwise this could be, you know—I could pass away in my chair here. [laughs]</p>

J.R.:	It's all good stuff. What about cultural and community-building opportunities in the late [19]80s and [19]90s? Were there many opportunities, especially for young men? Talk a little bit about what sorts of problems young Salvadoran-American men faced in this period. What were some of the ways people were trying to help them? For example staying in school, go to college, the mural.
Jon Liss:	<p>Sure. So we started a youth project in the—[19]95 and on I guess, maybe [19]97 it was pretty strong. And we had seen a lot of youth, and youth are both alienated because they came late in their teen years and it's hard to pick up the language and all, and they're treated as sort of second-class students. People were basically taught or incorporated or internalized their inferiority, so part of our idea was how do we address issues of self-esteem, having people feel good about their history and their culture and sort of reclaim their personal and community history. So we started a youth project around that and I think the best way for people to learn by actually doing—through the process of a campaign. That's how you learn it—if you develop leadership. So we would identify community issues that were affecting youth and work on those issues and youth would lead the work. And it included getting the first bilingual counselor at T.C. Williams [High School], which had a large Latino population, but no counselors were bilingual. So you had folks basically on racial grounds even though they were doing great in school and everything else being told, oh you should, you know, either go to NOVA [Northern Virginia Community College], which there's nothing wrong with going to community college, or just drop out and get a job or—graduate and get a job. What are you going to do, as opposed to—oh, what is Patricia's last name? There was that famous one was Patricia who they were telling her—that her parents [who] were hotel workers—they told her, you know, good luck, maybe you should go to NOVA where you can get a job, and she ended up getting a scholarship to Cornell [University in Ithaca, New York].</p> <p>I mean, the point being, the absence of bilingual counselors at T.C. Williams meant that you were really getting bad treatment—that there wasn't—parents were unable to advocate for their children and for the children's future. So we fought for and won a—the first dual—you know. They were told there's no money in the budget and lo and behold, after a number of protests, they found money in the budget and hired a dual-language person mid-semester or mid-term I guess like in December, January—Laura Newton. I think eventually, ten years later she was fired, but she had a nice run and they got other bilingual counselors now. Ah, we also fought for in-state tuition at the community college. So undocumented folks or folks even I think even with green cards were being charged out-of-state if you weren't a citizen. Robert Templin, I think is still the president over at NOVA, and it was very good and favorable so we met with him. [Robert Templin retired as president of NOVA effective February 1, 2015.] He said basically—great, we'll charge these—we'll</p>

	make an internal policy change and charge everybody in-state, just don't do any press release on this because as soon as the world finds out [laughs] we're going to lose that right 'cause the State will shut it down. So we were able to get in-state tuition. It probably lasted for ten, twelve years until the State eventually shut it down. Now, ya know, it goes back and forth depending on how—a green card you can get in-state, but some of the other statuses you have to fight a little bit harder or it's a little less clear. So those are two examples.
Murals Created by Youth	
Jon Liss:	Our youth made a number of murals that we have hanging around the Arlandria area. So that—that was a good. They would often study the history of murals in Latin American art. They would figure out what they wanted to draw on. They would visit other murals. They'd work with an artist—they meaning our youth—and they would actually get up either on plywood or the scaffolding and paint murals so we have—there's still one, two, three, one on the side of our building—there's still three rather large-scale murals. There's another one or two smaller things that—one's no longer around—but there's at least three that are still around.
J.R.:	Is this [the large mural on the building at 3801 Mount Vernon Avenue] the one that was dedicated in [19]93?
Jon Liss:	Outside here, no, the one outside here—I think there's a date on it. I think it was August 2006 I believe. There's one down on the Duron Paint that was—paint store—which is now a City building. That was probably [19]93. That was the first one we did and that probably had a celebration—there's a newspaper article on it. And then there's one on the side the apartments on Bruce Street over here in Arlandria.
J.R.:	I got to check out the one on Duron.
Jon Liss:	Well the Duron now—the original one on Duron—we used to paint them on plywood and then put them up—frame them up and put them on the wall. The first one we put up there eventually rotted out. There's a new one, and now they've put it inside the building.
J.R.:	Oh, okay.
Jon Liss:	So if you look—it's a city-owned building—now it's like a community center but there's no AC [air conditioning] or heat so it's got three seasons if you will—a community center there right next to the 24-Hour Express—you can go and look in the window and see the mural on the inside—they saved them and put them on the inside.
J.R.:	Fantastic.
Jon Liss:	And actually I'm mistaken—that is the original one. There's another one that was rotted and that we had to throw away.
J.R.:	Okay—what's the address of that building?

Jon Liss:	It's going to be—I'm guessing like the 4100 block of Mount Vernon Avenue on the odd side of the street. It says like—Arlandria Community Center or something on it—you'll see it—it's right—there's a parking lot where the farmers' market is, there's a 24-Hour Express and in between is like a reddish, I think it's reddish, painted building and that's the building.
J.R.:	I gotta—got to check it out.
Jon Liss:	Yeah, you can look on the inside and then go to Bruce Street—the little courtyard behind Mom's Grocery Store. Go in the courtyard there and on the side of the building at 3911 Bruce Street you'll see it—it's really a nice mural. The youth read a poem by [Bertolt] Brecht that was a "worker reads history." So, ya know, history is often told as the story of generals and kings, but who really makes the world, who built the pyramids, who built all these great wonders of the world, it's working people, blah blah blah. So our youth read that poem, talked about it, and then did their picture of what it was like growing up in Arlandria and what the jobs that people do here. So, of course we have, the soccer player, one of the most popular jobs, not that I know of anybody here who's a professional soccer player, but we also have somebody who worked in a dry cleaner, a teacher, construction worker—there's a number of working people portrayed on the mural. It's really nice. So it's on Bruce Street, on the side at 3911 Bruce Street.
J.R.:	And Brecht's, how do you spell Brecht's name?
Jon Liss:	Bertolt, B-E-R-T-O-L-T, I believe and the Brecht is B-R-E-C-H-T. So it's a great poem—it's actually in the Studs Terkel's book [<i>Working People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do</i> , Random House, Pantheon Books Division, 1974, page xxxi]. There's—if you pull that down there [points to the book on a shelf next to JR]—there's a quote from it. We read Studs Terkel's book and there was Brecht's thing there and that's what got people inspired. So when we finish this interview you should read that. Apparently you haven't.
J.R.:	I have not.
Jon Liss:	And after you read it you may want to paint your own mural. [laughter]
Committee Against Police Violence	
J.R.:	Okay [laughter]. Great. Okay. Another subject. You were—in 1994 you were instrumental in organizing a Committee Against Police Violence in Alexandria, which was to address police violence after the shooting of Jimmy J. Lopez. Can you talk a little bit about what was going on in the Central American community and in particular in its interaction with the police? What were the types of issues that immigrants were frustrated with? In what ways were the police frustrated? Do you think in hindsight that the Committee was effective in trying to build bridges between the police and the community and hire more officers of Central American heritage?

Jon Liss:	<p>So—now in 2015 I feel like maybe technology and video cameras have finally caught up to the reality that people of color in this country live every day. So now you're seeing, ya know, black men and probably Latino men—less so video-wise—shot down in the street or beaten up and that was going on—that was rampant down here. Not every officer, not every police person, but a number of them. So, Jimmy was killed. Jimmy was killed. He was probably drunk and probably—and swinging a belt. That was it. He was armed with his own [belt] and swinging around his head. Officers shot—sprayed tear gas at him—into the wind, is my hypothesis—it blew back into his face—officer's face. The officer freaked out, pulled out a gun and killed him. So that was Jimmy, that was Jimmy. And so Jimmy's parents came here. We pushed the case as hard as we can but again in the absence of video technology, it's hard to prove—it's hard to get—ya know, cops will get up there and say what they say, and people are gonna believe the cop over, whatever ragtag group from the community.</p> <p>Also there was Purificacion Zelaya, whose son—he's guilty of a crime to be clear. He actually changes people's spark plugs in his driveway. He owned a small house in Arlandria. Still lives—still lives there. And he sent his—probably at that point fourteen or fifteen year-old son—out to the street to check the model number so he could order the right parts—and—the cops were running an undercover thing cause there was a report of car thieves going on. They see a young Latino guy in a car—figure he's a car thief. He's in front of his house, checking out the model number, so they can order the right parts, and they basically ended up taking his dad's—Purificacion [Zelaya], the dad—as they try to arrest his son, putting his face on the ground and rubbing until it's like raw, like hamburger. Yeah. And then Officer Bernal—ya know, I was there when they did the testimony. We got twenty witnesses from the community. He got up there and lied—Officer Bernal—I don't know if he's still on the force. And, yeah, our guy was convicted, yeah, was beaten up and convicted. So there's a number of issues.</p> <p>Carlos, what is Carlos' last name? Sanchez. So Carlos was drunk—so, yeah, there was a drunken guy in front of the 24-Hour Express. Cops picked him up. Slammed him repeatedly against a telephone pole. How do we know? We took his picture the next day and you could see the little—you know the little metal things that come out of the telephone pole—you could see those marks going right up and down his back. It looked like he had the impression of a telephone pole. And he ended up getting fifteen thousand dollars in a civil suit, which is small compensation.</p> <p>So these are like three of the cases, and we would literally—I won't say dozens—but would have cases really regularly. Two things—we did demand that they have bilingual capacity and over time they did do that. And we really wanted—and it's a demand I still think is relevant to this community and this country—is we really wanted a civilian review board</p>
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	<p>with subpoena power. Actually you would have independent people [pause] stepping back. The second largest budget item in the City—in most cities’ budget—number one is schools, number two is police. There’s no independent oversight. There’s no detail review. So whatever abuses are you basically go to court—is all you can hope for. I just think that’s bad stewardship and at least—to a structural problem where you essentially—and again video cameras are starting to maybe to equalize the field cause now cops don’t have quite the same level of impunity. But that’s not all, but there’s a number of cops who basically operate—thought they could operate—with impunity and were an occupying army essentially, and so we worked and they hired more bilingual personnel—not necessarily Central American—so that was another issue. There’s different levels of national chauvinism that that you can witness, even with folks who speak native Spanish.</p> <p>But nonetheless we did push it through and I think by our being around eventually Chief Samarra [Charles E. Samarra, City of Alexandria Chief of Police who retired in August 2006] I think was a straight shooter. I mean that in a good sense, not as actually shooting at people. [laughs] And he actually worked with us and we did some—for a couple of years—sort of like sensitivity training where officers would come by—we’d walk the neighborhood with them—we’d talk about concerns and all this stuff. And so I think there was some actual changes in attitude, changes in hiring practices. And we had a number—I think a number, ya know, that developed good relations. I think as we develop more political power here the police also decided not to mess with us and the community nearly as much. And also, you know, I’d say partly there’s probably less people in part because of harassment and part because of changing economics—there’s less people living in the street or, you know, the people have more regularized homes, in part because some have been pushed out of the area, so there’s a little bit less, like, in-street fighting or even drinking. So, ya know, if you’re an affluent homeowner and you can drink your few beers in your living room then go to bed, that’s fine. If you’re poor person living in an overcrowded apartment and you go stand in your front stoop and drink a few beers—you’re in a confrontation with the cops, beaten up, and charged with something—wearing a bracelet or locked up. [pause] Sorry. I digress.</p>
<p>J.R.:</p>	<p>No, no. Very good stuff. Were you also involved with the Latino Civil Rights Task Force?</p>
<p>Jon Liss:</p>	<p>That was actually in D.C. after the Mount Pleasant Rebellion [May 5–6, 1991. See “District Officials Mark 20th Anniversary of Mount Pleasant Protest,” David Nakamura, <i>Washington Post</i>, May 6, 2011.] After the police abuse of an individual there, and really was a rebellion with people throwing stuff out—you know basically clearing police and even the National Guard at a certain point—out of large parts of Mount Pleasant. So we worked—they did some stuff regionally and we were part of that loosely—I think it was caught between a rock and hard place and never</p>

	<p>really developed a full sort of organizing approach, program, or an actual set of demands. It was also caught between multiple jurisdictions, so Mount Pleasant is clearly in Washington, D.C. It's got its own unique set of problems—the part of an overall sort of mosaic—regional mosaic of problems—but it was hard to come up with a regional sort of agenda, but, yeah, we were part of that for a number of years. Probably three to five years until it petered out.</p>
<p>New Virginia Majority</p>	
J.R.:	Tell us about the new organization Virginia—what is it called?
Jon Liss:	It was called originally Virginia New Majority—now a couple of months ago we changed it to New Virginia Majority.
J.R.:	Okay. It was developed in [20]07?
Jon Liss:	<p>Yeah [20]07. Basically we did a fight in nearby Arna Valley, Arlington. We could see that there's—like I said earlier—there's national and international—global—real estate developers moving people out. We recognized that we needed to have more clout, more power at a State level at the very least. That if we were going to stop gentrification, preserve affordable housing, or address all the other sort of racial, class, gender issues that we were trying to take on, we needed to have a much bigger scale of organizing. That we weren't going to be able to knock on enough doors fast enough, to involve enough people, to win the kind of changes that we needed and really wanted to demand. And the good thing was our assessment was, Virginia was transforming, that you had multiracial Northern Virginia. You had a large [group of] Latino, Asian, African immigrants. You had an historical African-American community. You had a developed—rapidly developing—high-tech sector that was more, and also government public sector, that was much more opened to an active government, a progressive government, whether locally or the State level. So we did this assessment in 2007 and created a new organization, then Virginia New Majority now New Virginia Majority, with the idea of mass civic engagement in what was called the Urban Crescent, essentially running from Tidewater, Hampton Roads, Virginia Beach through Richmond up to Northern Virginia. So if you draw it on a map it really looks like a croissant or crescent. And so we start organizing there.</p> <p>We created the organization in 2007. We knock on, probably 400,000 doors—I mean many of them the same doors—multiple times. And this guy named Barack Obama ends up getting elected to President. We were nonpartisan but we were encouraging folks who historically didn't vote to vote. And there was a massive turnout not just African-Americans—Latino, Asian, African immigrants. Lots of people came out and voted who hadn't voted before, and Virginia, which had voted, since 1964, since Lyndon Johnson, had voted conservative and Republican basically, voted for much more—the more progressive candidate we'll say in a nonpartisan sense.</p>

	<p>And we did that as a nonpartisan organization. We have different legal statuses, so we were not saying vote for Barack Obama. We were saying vote for somebody who's going to get you healthcare, vote for somebody who's gonna start changing this country. People could figure out who they wanted to vote for on their own. [pause] So we did that in 2007—we're still doing it today.</p>
<p>J.R.:</p>	<p>Fantastic. And you [New Virginia Majority] just hired—Mark Hutchins for—or [correcting] Bart [Hutchins]?</p>
<p>Jon Liss:</p>	<p>Yeah, we're doing a leadership development pipeline so folks can develop their skills and apply it in organizations or in the public sphere.</p>
<p>Work with Other Immigrant Communities</p>	
<p>J.R.:</p>	<p>Fantastic idea. Are you working—sounds like you are working with immigrant communities not only here but also throughout Virginia?</p>
<p>Jon Liss:</p>	<p>Sure. Two things. First we also organized taxi drivers at Tenants and Workers United. So we've organized—for really ten years—taxi drivers. Created a taxi-driver-owned company called Union Taxi Cab Cooperative. We've broken free of the Yellow Cab monopoly for at least a few years. And those drivers are—some South Asian but the majority Ethiopian and Eritrean. So we work closely with them on an ongoing basis. And then our organization—and this is New Virginia Majority—played a sort of catalytic or central role pulling together Northern Virginia—I'm sorry, the Virginia Coalition for Immigrant Rights. So it's an ongoing entity.</p> <p>With the recent creation of DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals] and DAPA [Deferred Action for Parents of Americans] are the acronyms. It's essentially Obama's administrative decree from November of 2014 [sound in background of an aircraft flying overhead], which allows—eventually will allow—about half, you know, about 4 or 5 million people to be—normalize—their status at least temporarily. So we're working to help set up a system to process, you know, work with volunteers, have people from this neighborhood come and get their—essentially, their documentation in order. They've got to be in the country for five years. For DAPA it means basically you gave birth to a child here [laughs]—you're the father or mother of a child that was born here and you get excused. For DACA it means that you're essentially the “dreamers”—as it was called—you're essentially a student who came here under age fourteen—I think it's—under the new regulation it'll be like under age twenty or something. You came here and your parents and you can now get—essentially normalize things—not permanent. You have to renew it and it's not—you know, if you get a different president you can get a different result. But we think it's a huge advance so we created—we sort of helped bring together the Virginia Coalition for Human Rights. The State of Virginia level we do stuff in the General Assembly. At the national level we push for immigration reform. And now we're collectively working on</p>

	<p>providing service so that—Virginia as a state has about 92,000 folks who are eligible for one of these two programs. My guesstimate—nonscientific educated guesstimate—is there’s probably four or five thousand people in that category in Alexandria. So our goal as an organization is to help process or support a couple thousand of them to get their papers over the next two years.</p>
<p>Major Issues Still Facing Immigrants</p>	
<p>J.R.:</p>	<p>Fantastic. What do you see are the major issues facing today’s immigrant communities in Alexandria and, by extension, Virginia? I can just go through your resume and identify quite a few—affordable housing, access to healthcare, deportations, taxi cabs and Uber, and there’s probably a few others.</p>
<p>Jon Liss:</p>	<p>I think you hit it pretty good. Let me ask you a few questions. No. Okay. [laughs] I mean yes, those are generally the issues. I mean it—and health goes out a little bit better if you’ve got a job and are documented. But if you’re undocumented you’re still in the—it went from forty million to, what, thirty million without healthcare now. So undocumented are probably eleven million or ten million of that thirty million, so in this area if you’re undocumented you probably have about ninety-five percent of who don’t have health insurance.</p> <p>We recently did a health fair. We worked with Kaiser. We set up a program. And so 300 immigrants were able to get—undocumented immigrants actually—were able to get two years of healthcare for free. So we just set that up and so we got—it’s a small drop in the bucket—but it was obviously good for those 300 families. It’s great. So that’s ongoing—so I think it’s healthcare, I think it’s like the whole issues around work. I mean Uber hits taxi drivers specifically but there’s a number of jobs. I know when my daughter graduates college in, hopefully, three years—she’s a freshman this year. You know I don’t know if she’s gonna be a barista at a coffee shop or what’s she’s going to do. There’s not a lot—depending on what your degree is in and what you know it’s a shrunken job market with often—they used the word precarious. Precarious. Proletariat and precarious together “precarry it,” folks who, you know, “shaky jobs.” They end up being video producers and stuff like that [laughter].</p>
<p>Concluding Questions</p>	
<p>J.R.:</p>	<p>That’s a “shout out” to you, Becca. [laughter] How has your work—there’s just a few concluding questions here—how has your work changed over time?</p>
<p>Jon Liss:</p>	<p>I think the biggest thing has been—I was generally the organizer doing like the direct contact with people, moving individuals, working in people’s living rooms, wherever. And now I’m more of an executive/managerial type. So I’m meeting with other institutional leaders, moving elected officials, doing the big campaign and doing much less of the direct contact.</p>

	<p>The closest exception would probably be the taxi drivers, where I'm still pretty hands-on. So I think that the biggest shift and as I am now running—you know, co-running one organization and running another—the other piece of it is I'm raising money, you know, essentially we need to raise one to two million dollars a year to pay the bills.</p>
J.R.:	<p>What are your proudest accomplishments, and in this context—your organization won a big award a few years back—if you would talk about that.</p>
Jon Liss:	<p>Sure. We won the Ford [Foundation] Leadership for [A] Changing World Award [see “National Recognition For Tenants’ Committee,” Chris L. Jenkins, <i>Washington Post</i>, October 9, 2003]. So there was a team of leaders from here, And they were picking—I can't remember—it was like seven or eight organizations each year for about three or four years around the country and we were one of the ones honored. So that was that was a nice thing—went up to New York—a number of folks had never even left the area, except for, you know, they came from El Salvador, but once they got here they had never left. They were some of the award winners—child, home child care, home-based child-care providers were some of the members. So five of us went up to be—to accept the award. The organization got a large—significant—cash prize. That helped us run and build our power, which we thought was the main thing. And as a chance to meet and network with other organizations from around the country that had done similar work. So that was really good.</p> <p>Biggest accomplishment, ya know, we talked about creating the Housing Cooperative going from an organization with not even a wooden nickel to actually 20 million dollars of the property collectively owned by residents, many of whom—who never had, never owned anything before. And they still own—now ten years later, whatever. It's got some ups and downs but they still own it over ten years later.</p> <p>We passed a living wage ordinance in Alexandria and Arlington, which requires when the City contracts stuff out—that the people engaged in the contract get paid enough money to pay their bills. As some of the workers told me and we quoted in the <i>New York Times</i>—they said—this is great; now I only have to work two jobs instead of three. So I can see my—I can see my daughter on Sundays—as one of the guys said. So small things like that—that's really, you know, satisfying.</p> <p>And then the taxi cooperative, we—after 9-11 [September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks], when National Airport was shut down, we developed a close working relationship with a number of taxi drivers. Three-four years later, after an ongoing campaign which the drivers really, literally, motored, we changed the taxi ordinance and created the opportunity for drivers to create—leave a monopoly company effectively and create their own driver-owned company. So 220—currently 224 drivers are co-owners of Alexandria Union Cab, and they save about eight thousand dollars a year in</p>

	<p>reduced stand dues by working for the company they own themselves. So I know for some people that meant they were able to send their kids to college and pay for it. And they were able to buy a house. It makes a huge difference if you can imagine an extra eight thousand dollars in a working person's hands or pocket.</p> <p>Those are some of the things. Then we done a bunch—we won medical debt for—debt relief for probably close to two million dollars at this point. Then the nonprofit hospital chain—people'd go in sick, would not have insurance, would come out with huge medical debt, and if they didn't speak English in particular, but actually anybody, they would be pounded mercilessly until they started paying. So we had to do a whole campaign and eventually negotiated and they were treated much better. And many of them—like I say two million dollars of medical debt was forgiven. So that was important.</p> <p>The building we're sitting in was a product of our youth group leading a struggle to get community space. I think in their mind they were getting youth space. I'll say they still have a large room, but the building is actually owned by the adults [laughs] are actually running most of the stuff here. But the youth do have a room and use the space for their own events and all that stuff too. So that was another big accomplishment. There's others but I think those are like some of the highlights.</p>
<p>J.R.:</p>	<p>Okay. So, final question.</p>
<p>Jon Liss:</p>	<p>I'm exhausted but go ahead. [laughter] I've aged two years just in the filming here.</p>
<p>J.R.:</p>	<p>I appreciate the effort. What issues do you still feel continue to be major for immigrant residents living in Alexandria?</p>
<p>Jon Liss:</p>	<p>So I would start—it's actually going full cycle—what brought me into this work was housing. I mean it's one of those—it's pretty fundamental—housing is one of those basic things. In this country, unlike many other sort of industrial countries, it's treated as a commodity and, because of that, people get priced out. So there is very little at this point, if any, market-rate affordable housing left in the City of Alexandria. We've lost twelve thousand units over the last ten years. I mean there's not—there wasn't much to begin with—and I've seen it all being squeezed out. And some of it's just greedy developers buying and selling. Some of it's the City supporting that, so most of City Council voted the development on the West End [the western part of the City]. That's going to wipe out five thousand units of marginally market-rate affordable housing. So, to me, affordable housing is sort of where we started doing this work and it's an ongoing concern.</p> <p>I think workers' rights—it's two sides to the same coin—but ya know, on the work—I mean if you actually made significantly more you could pay more rent. So it's two sides of the same coin.</p>

	<p>So, the working people—rights around that—and then I think at New Virginia Majority our major push, and this is more of a statewide thing, is around a whole range of voting rights, making it more reasonable so people can get, more easily, registered to vote, and vote. For example, why shut down the polls at seven o'clock? Anybody who works in this region knows the traffic, and knows that if they work in D.C. or work in Tyson's [Corner] or Dulles [International Airport area near it in western Fairfax County] they're trying to get home and it's raining or there's an accident, they don't vote. So why not have, you know, no-excuse absentee voting, or early voting, or let people vote until nine o'clock, or ten o'clock, or whatever. Those are the kinds of things we are pushing for at the state level.</p> <p>The other thing, actually, and we've done some work here locally but also statewide, is around rights restoration. So sort of legacy of Jim Crow legislation from 1906, Virginia is one of the four states where you go to jail, convicted of a felony, you serve your time, and you come out, and you need an individual pardon to get the right to vote again. So we have 350,000 people disenfranchised in the State of Virginia, out of a population, ya know, like 8.2 million. So it's a huge number. Fifty-two percent of those people are African-American. So it really is a systematic disenfranchisement—typically of African-American men in particular. So part of the whole mass incarceration. So we're launching efforts with other partners to really move on stopping this mass incarceration and restoring the rights and sort of broadening democracy. Our sense is, if you have a more participatory, broader, and deeper democracy in this City and in this State, a whole bunch of—a floodgate of change can start happening. If you keep voting rights restricted, ya know—initially a couple hundred years ago, here in Alexandria, it was like white male property owners and we're just pushing on and on for all these hundreds of years to try and make it really a full participatory broad and deep democracy. If you have that I think—yet again—there'll be a flood of changes around affordable housing, workers' rights, what have you, mass transit, et cetera.</p>
J.R.:	Jon, you've been an inspiration.
Jon Liss:	Thanks.
J.R.:	Listening to your wisdom and all that you have to say about your work—the passion definitely came across. Thank you very much.
Jon Liss:	Thanks for doing it. Thanks for bearing with me for a couple of hours [laughs].
J.R.:	It's been my pleasure.
Jon Liss:	Thanks, Becca. [laughs] [J.R. reaches for audio recorder.] Oh no, you didn't have batteries! Do it again. [laughter]