

>> [MUSIC] Hi all. I'm Marisa Zapata. This is the podcast where we examine homelessness by talking to researchers and experts who of course include people with lived the experience of homelessness to understand what we're missing in the headlines and some bits. In each episode, we will help clear up misconceptions about homelessness and to answer what it would take to prevent and end homelessness in Portland and beyond. Who am I? I'm an Associate Professor of land-use planning at Portland State University and Director of PSU's Homelessness Research and Action Collaborative. A research center dedicated to reducing and preventing homelessness. Where we lift up the experiences and perspectives of people of color. [MUSIC] In this episode, Laquida Landford is a community health worker, activist, and grassroots organizer. She has worked for several Portland-area non-profits. She is also the lead visionary of the AfroVillage Movement was strives to build, a healing space for communities of color and will be Portland's first village for black community members experiencing homelessness. I'm so glad that you're here with us today and looking forward to you sharing knowledge with me and with our listeners about your experiences working in housing and homelessness in particular. If you could just start off telling us a little bit about yourself. >> Yes, good afternoon, good evening, wherever you are on the world folks. I'm really excited about being here. Thank you for this invitation. My name is Laquida Landford. That's L-A-Q-U-I-D-A L-A-N-D-F-O-R-D, Laquida Landford. My pronouns are she, her, hers and my nickname and as everyone will call me as Q in my community and in my family. I'm talking to my family today and my friends and I'm looking forward to sharing my experience with you all, what my expertise are and how I navigate in my community, and just a person of color dealing with housing insecurities. I was born in Los Angeles, California and my mother was a young mom when she had me, single mom and my father is also an immigrant from Central America. They came together, they make magic, they made me [LAUGHTER]. >> We're all grateful. >> Thank you. >> I think it'd be fun if you don't mind sharing where your dad is from, because most people in the United States hear is Central America, and have a very particular idea in mind. I think you're going to surprise them. >> I will surprise them and I will say drumroll, please dah, dah, dah, I'm just playing its a Belize. He's Garifuna, and we're from the Garinagu tribe, we go back as far as West Africa. He came to the United States in the '70s. My little bitty grandmother, fair skin. They came through the back of Mexico into the United States. [LAUGHTER] She's a warrior, she's 95, so I get that stripped. I'm so blessed to be a part of their lineage. Then my biological mom, her family were from Texas and it goes back into their contexts. Slavery and my great grandmother and grandmother picked cotton. My mom says she picked cotton once when she was a little girl. Yeah, I have a lot of richness in my energy. >> I just think it's great because I'm going to I think part of what we're trying to do is confound stereotypes and conventional narratives. Particularly this idea of black immigrants and people who are descendants of recent immigrants who are black to the United States and people who are African-American. Then also really raising this question of what does it mean to be from Latin America. >> I know. >> Belize is in a Spanish-speaking former colony. >> It is. I also lived there. I went to high school in Central America. They thought they'll put me on a punishment when I went to go live in Belize. [LAUGHTER] >> Belize is gorgeous. >> It's beautiful. I didn't understand the beauty back then because I was a teenager, but it actually took me again out of that environment of the chaos, the United States and what have you or what my dad wanted to prevent because I went to live with my dad full time, and that's something that we can touch on. We ask them, who am I, my mother

had to deal with the narrative around Ronald Reagan being the president and the welfare queen. My mom was 15 years old when she got pregnant with me. She had me at 16 years old. Like she dropped out of high school, she became a full-time mom with what services? We're going to get to like those conversations about services and resources. There were very little services and resources in the 80s and South Central Los Angeles is where we were living at. But yes, such a beautiful place. We got our Mayans, we have our Spaniards, we have our Indians. I went to school in a diverse community, and so we'll get to later about like the concept or what like what villages or community really means to me. That is that experience that I had as a teenager who lived in Central America. >> Why don't we go ahead and transition to your adult experiences either in work however, you want to define work in homelessness. >> During a period of time in my life, when I was a kid, as I said, I went to live with my dad full time, but my mom was an only child and my grandmother and my great grandmother both passed away. You have this single mom at that time, she has three kids. You have the crack era, you have like what happens to black women, black community during that time. We became homeless due to what was going on in her personal life. I lived in a shelter at the age of nine years old and I lived in a car when my mother couldn't pay rent and she didn't really know what to do, I've lived in a church. These are all part of my childhood experiences that led me later on in my life like how it comes together full circle. I remember the social worker that my mom that was our caseworker. They called her social worker, a young black woman by the name of Miss White. I'll never forget Miss White because me and my sister when she brought us Christmas gifts. She was roughly around my mom's age and it was the different was at the time when my mom was 22. She was 22 or 23 Miss White, the social worker. She had education and my mother did not have the education. She brought the gifts for us. She brought us hulu loops and she brought us just a bunch of toys and things like that. I had those vary on childhood experiences with a system that was actually experimenting on black women and Latinx women and immigrant women as single home. That's what led me later on in my life to really get involved in then just that experience, I would say after I got out of high school, I moved back to the United States and I moved to Portland. >> In Portland, how did you get engaged and working in homelessness? >> Well, my very first job at a non-profit organization was Central City Concern. For those who don't know about Central City Concern, at that time it was the Portland Alternative Health clinic. >> Okay. >> I was desperately looking for a job. I picked up a newspaper by Pioneer Square Mall. Looked on the back of it. It says interested, you can sign up then I was like, "That's just a few blocks away" [LAUGHTER]. I dropped off my resume in the rain, no umbrella asked to speak to whatever supervisor was onsite, gave them my resume and asked him if I could have the interview on the spot. They gave me one. [LAUGHTER] I started working as a medical intake specialist at Central City Concern. There's where I met many folks in our community at the time and that was about 1998, I would say, it was here for a few years. That was my big girl job. [LAUGHTER] >> The first one. I love it. >> First one. >> Well, for listeners Central City Concern it's definitely one of the, if not the largest homeless service providers in the Portland region. They do a lot of work around recovery housing. Then you've also worked at JOIN and at Urban League, correct? >> Yes. >> This was coming back. I lived here for 10 years. I had that experience working with Central City Concern for about two years. At that time, I didn't have a lot of questions. I just didn't have a mentor or someone echo. We didn't have the conversations that we do today. I can recall back then where the black community or African-Americans that

were coming for treatment, it was a hard time to find a stable place for folks to shelter. Well, I wouldn't call it bad, but where our crisis is now in the 21st century. Later on and I was moving back to Portland, so I lived here for 10 years. I adopted, I thought that I would not come back to Portland. I really wanted to reconnect with my mom and that's what brought me back. But before I moved back to Portland, I was looking for tapping in we're housing like on, I would say Craigslist's is what I can remember and really looking like, "Wow, Portland rent is expensive." [LAUGHTER] That wasn't the case. In my expensive mine because when I left Portland, my last apartment was \$600 and something dollars and it was before folks had moved out in a called it, referred to it as the numbers. I lived on 120th in Burnside and when I got to Portland, I was very shocked. There was so much of a change. That led me to my own housing insecurity. I came back on house but I didn't come thinking that I wasn't going to find a place to stay or a job or anything like that. For me, with that return trip, I had heard words within a few weeks. I went to transition project and a friend of mine said, "share with me" that there was a resource that was helping folks out with rental support or to get into an apartment. I found it to be very challenging that I had to wake up at six o'clock in the morning and then go stand in line to hope that I am chosen for that day to speak to someone about housing. That was my very first experience with that being here in Portland. >> I think based on some of the experiences and what you hear people saying, what do you think community members misunderstand or don't get about homelessness? >> The misconception around is that a person is not willing to do the work for themselves. That's not always necessary. That wasn't the case for me. My life changed within 10 years, not just me here. I also was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2010. I was living in San Diego. I was making pretty decent money to be able to afford the rent in San Diego and after living in Portland for 10 years and having that being my first apartment and those experiences, I thought paying \$800 or close to \$900 was ridiculous. I'm like, "Who pays this amount of money for rent just to stay somewhere?" But yeah, I feel like that's a misconception that folks get is that we don't, we oftentimes, I believe from 2020, we now realize a lot more of what's been going on over the last 30-40 years, which has led us to many of these conversations and spaces in which we are in right now. >> This is one of my issues that comes up that pisses me off the most. I know so many people who work their asses off and are killing themselves and dealing with stuff I can never imagine and yet I meet people like you and tons of people who were in the community who were up there and doing stuff all the time. It angers me and pains me to even imagine that someone would pass that judgment on people. >> It goes back to sharing my story. Most people that I've met in my life or during this work, they have had similar situations where they were homeless as a child because of a system that is broken that took us out of the household, and sometimes you never recover from that because it's been a part of your life, whole life. But I've seen a two-parent home by living with my father and his wife and them having stability. They also work their asses off because they were both immigrants from another country, although they have their citizenship, they didn't qualify for many of those services. and they stayed under the radar. That was how they although they were doing all the right things, my dad is a homeowner, but it locked in a 30-year deal. I think my dad has paid his house off when he's back home and Beleise, he built his house before he paid his house off in America. That's capitalism. Those are things that you might have. I believe that it's a lot to do with our experiences and what gets us to certain places in our life. The criminal justice system in addiction and different things that people go through and the change in the shift can miss so

much time being incarcerated, you come back to society and you're unable to navigate all of these new changes without getting the handbook. >> You have immediately transitioned into my next question which is about these disparate rates of housing and security and homelessness we see for BIPOC in general but black people in particular. The systems are creating these outcomes. How in the world are we ever supposed to get out of this? You hit on the three systems that I always talk about, which are the housing system, AKA capitalism, health care, and the criminal justice system. I think you've talked a little bit about how this has shown up for you personally and I'm wondering if you have any observations from the work you've been doing up till now with people in Portland about how those things are showing up. >> You mentioned about my work experience over at the Urban League of Portland. They've been a non-profit organization. They are a part of a national movement of the civil rights movement from 1945 and they've been here at Portland, Oregon. As I have been exploring and connecting more of, not just my blackness, but where I wanted to lie that energy when I started to see how are the disparities in displacement of black folks in America began and I thought that that would be a great organization that I can grow with professionally and community wise. My role was to be supportive to those folks at the new shelters or Dignity Village. >> What did you really see as some of the major causes of homelessness for them? Either causing them to end up homeless or preventing them from exiting homelessness. What was really giving rise to those folks to end up in a situation? What parts of the system were really getting in their way from exiting? >> The displacement learning from my relationship, my new relationship at the Urban League of Portland of what the displacement and black community where it was a center for the black community and just really much learning. When that displacement happened in that gentrification, it really shook up a lot of people systems. That I feel is where we come in with the conversations that we're having today about the what, the who, the when, and the government, We're speaking of historical disparities in these systems. I only can recall maybe three times that I've actually had really good if we call it good health care. Oftentimes for black and brown folks, we are not informed, or properly educated about 41K and medical and how to choose and we'd look at I know for myself, I look at, "Why you're going to take more money out of my check? I'm barely getting this amount of money to go into this." I don't understand. We come in with being behind in what I was experiencing. I want to say some of my very first clients or I didn't like to call them clients, the folks that I worked with. They were either coming from the criminal justice system. They were descendants of folks who lived in Northeast Portland. Since it's a black organization, we support mostly black community. Or there were folks who had moved here like I said, and didn't properly get settled in, had a job, and then something happens. We're always falling through the crack. >> Yeah. >> Then once we fall through the crack, then that spirals downwards. >> I think that I tried to talk about homelessness as the summation of all of our massive systemic failures and since racism is an integral foundation of the country, of course, we're going to see massive disparities and homelessness. But I think the way that you even talk about this is really important because when you ask a white person, how did we end up in this crisis? Their response to that is very recent time-wise like they might go back to the 1980s. But if you talk to a person of color and particularly multi-generation black, indigenous, Latino, and Asian community members, our response is historical. We understand that this is rooted in the beginning. The other thing I think you're getting at is that, again, a person who is white if I ask what's going on with homelessness, they would not reference

displacement first and foremost. Whereas I think that that story is so fundamental, the experience of Black Portland, there's been also black people across the country. >> Absolutely. Across the globe, being again, my father there, when you're taken out of your natural environment or your community, you have to re-learn something and try to fit in. We've been in America against our will, or we've been in America for what they said is a land of opportunity. The opportunities are, we are, there's slavery, there's that history because that's our reference of like, what our people generationally have been through for me to have gotten to this point in the 21st century, to sit here and be a part of a podcast so that we can share our own stories and our own connections because we have been told one narrative. White people, they have to study, they got a goal, [LAUGHTER] I get in a book and they go by the book. Sometimes going by the book is not. [OVERLAPPING] >> Basis of stories. >> They want to experience something. Now, there's this hype about this trending uprising of a movement and we're seeing more whites involved in these movements. Identity, again, we know who we are, we know where we come from, and we oftentimes really know where we want to go if we are allowed. Well, when there are barriers and breaks within where we can and cannot go, it starts to affect your mental health. Over the years as I've gotten older, I've had some experience with life in general. >> Yeah. >> Becoming an advocate and working towards policy from those experiences that I had with meeting so many people I've probably met or I can imagine, the numbers because of the work that I also created my own lane, so to speak, because of the information that I was sitting in on and was very disturbed. Why are we not doing the alternative shelters or sheltering for black folks that didn't feel comfortable? When we're seeing the disparities even within locally of the shelter system, if a black person, and this was mostly black, I have not had a lot of experiences with other ethnicity groups with their experience of being kicked out of a shelter and being kicked out for six months. If you're kicked out for six months, where are you going to go when you don't really have anywhere to go to begin with? This is through one of our local system. They get a lot of funding from the government. Again, folks who are social workers, and I shared my experience of the first social worker that I've ever encountered in my life, she was black. >> It makes a huge difference. >> It makes a huge difference. >> Yeah. >> It made a huge difference. Even with the relationship with my mom and her, it made a huge difference. >> Also, maybe this is a great way to start talking about the idea around the AfroVillage. I'm wondering if you could explain for our listeners what alternative shelter is in your mind. >> Alternative shelter is from what I've learned my first experience or exposure was right to dream. I thought that was a really great idea or a concept around where people can stop in. Then I got to know the different leaderships that cultivated that idea and all that it took. One of my first clients, a young man that had spent 10 years in prison originally from Portland, Oregon, well, he fell under the Measure 11. Again, that is something that I totally disagree with and a part of that three-strike gamble, we speak about government what's happening on the West Side, Oregon, took that up, called it one thing and to crucify the young black man. >> Yeah. It's a specific three strikes and you're out. >> You're out. >> But there are things that are considered strikes aren't uniquely experienced by communities of color. >> He had showed up at the League and I was very new in this position. It was a new position but it also had a lot of flexibility with the fundings, and so I was getting to know the team. But I had already had people in mind to get them in housing [LAUGHTER] right away. Folks who live in their car outside of the Urban League Portland, young black men. I think about those as my younger brothers or nephews or just

young men that are in a situation because of family or moved here for school and their relationship but it didn't work out. Anyway, I had him make me at Right to Dream. We had a conversation. There's an expectation as well also to build a relationship with somebody overnight. Having somebody opened up to you from being traumatized. He didn't come to the Urban League for housing, he came for a job that day. It touched my heart. I had to be in spaces that really like it brought up a lot of trauma from myself of remembrance of what this whole system does to my people, to my community, and so that's where the alternative. We made our way around it. He disappeared, he came back, what have you, but I got him into housing. [OVERLAPPING] Got his first apartment out of being incarcerated for 10 years. >> Wow. >> Even before that, he didn't feel comfortable. At the time, we had folks living in tents. Because he had been incarcerated, he had preferred to be alone and not in big groups. He didn't have a phone, I bought him a phone. Just certain things happened. He just couldn't believe that this was really happening for him so quickly, and it actually made him nervous. Then I had other young black men and folks as well there. I started to create some thoughts and my idea. I house people in the first week. I housed in six months, 75 people. They were like, "How are you doing this?" I thought about what I would want in a housing in any alternative situation. I was gathering a lot of information. I will tell you I would come home at night when he said and I have this puzzle pieces laid all over the floor and on my wall like okay, this is going to go with this, this is going to go with this, and this is how I'm going to work this out. >> This is a great way to start talking about the idea around the AfroVillage. >> Besides the interaction with that person and other folks, black women are at the center of my heart. I met this black woman and you ask about the misconception. It's not sometimes that folks don't even have. They have whether it's education or past experience. It's just the day and time that we are living in. Some people who have experienced trauma throughout their lives or injuries to their body become disabled and then they are on social security, and all they get is a check for less than \$800, and rent is \$1,200. There's no way that they could possibly ever save up enough money, so they get discouraged and they get distracted. I had a woman that it always would catch me. My co-workers would say, "Come back on Mondays," because those were my office hours. Then I get invested very quickly to [LAUGHTER] a person's situation. What can I do not so much to help? I wanted to be that savior. But I also was listening to other things that we're going to be up and coming in the city and with that whole movement around Right to Dream and what they were. They had plans to do. They actually got displaced from that area because it wasn't a long-time situation. Then their sector. I started to explore. I ran into brother Ibrahim Mubarak, who also was one of the founders of Right to Dream. He had invited me to be a part of their board in several conversations. I love his energy and he became my mentor. I followed him around in 2019. There was a little bit of funding and some work to support around resident safe areas. I got to explore more information and we went to this really huge conference in Los Angeles at UCLA and it just opened and I'm like, this is what I'm going to do. This is what I'm going to work on. I felt like a lost child trying to find my place again through all of this. I have a really good friend, Kurt Rhea, who works with City Repair that we became friends through Urban League or community. Another amazing friend of mine and colleague. I love Todd Ferry. He works at Portland State University as well, and we ran into each other at an event. Also, Marta, an architect and designer. I had some other friends and community members who are farmers, and so I thought about workforce housing. I met this other person. I just wanted to build

that one, tiny home for that woman that I met in 2018 because she expressed about it being able to move, she can still pay something for. It was those sorts of things, a bunch of stuff, ping-ponging to led me to referring to this village as an Afro indigenous space for black women, femmes and queer women and queer folks and those formerly incarcerated. A lot has evolved with the AfroVillage's idea to a concept of me also become a researcher through this movement of alternatives sheltering working with my friends at Portland State University, the homeless. Shout-out to the homeless, research, action, collaborative. >> I'm just going to say that I think that the discussion of the village really just brings everything you're saying full circle. It's the idea of healing from the multi-generational trauma that is inflicted upon black people because of the racism and the way that all of the systems have continued to perpetuate violence against people who are black. It's that healing is having space and place. For listeners who aren't as familiar with the displacement in history and the legacy of racism against black people in Oregon. I would definitely suggest checking out contemporary work by Lisa Bates, who's done some really amazing work around displacement and gentrification. Karen Gibson wrote a wonderful article on Bleeding Albina about one of the episodes of displacement from many years ago, and then, of course, Walidah. I actually don't remember Walidah's last name because I think she's like Oprah to me. [LAUGHTER] She doesn't need a last name. [LAUGHTER] >> I made up her first name, right. >> But Walidah is brilliant and she can break down racism in Oregon like nobody's business. She's got tons of great stuff. Because I think there's also, it's what the village is doing. It's this idea. I always think about it when you talk about it like having a bubble. Like a bubble space in the city that's protective and healing and nurturing for people who are black. >> Also with the work I was going to mention, the pandemic, racial equity in housing and also Marta, who I met. I'm so grateful that we met [OVERLAPPING] today. She's amazing an architect and designer. We had a conversation the Monday before we went into to lock-in, and we've been meeting every since then. She helped me with the first idea. After Portland, after the classes ended, it was like, what's next? I wanted to continue. I had energy. I created a market space for storytelling and products and services and things like that to raise money and funds. Then I was able to shift that over into that exhibit. Then what me living in Old Town Chinatown came up with Old Town fresh. I'm invited for a design for reuse of train cart here in Portland. Marta and I, we came up with the AfroVillage on the movement. >> It's amazing stuff. For all of our listeners, we are going to have links to all of Laquida's work, and the ideas and the plans and, of course, the link if you want to make a wonderful contribution to help support Laquida's work. If you want to take Laquida out for a meal at the radio room once we're open from COVID, definitely let me know and I'll hook you up. >> Hook me up. >> Laquida is an amazing human being and always a delight to talk to. Well, Laquida, thank you so much for your time today. As always, [OVERLAPPING] I learned so much from you about your life and your experiences and how you're thinking about things. I know everybody listening will really appreciate everything you've had to say today. [MUSIC] >> All right. Thank you so much. >> Thank you, talk to you later friend. >> That was Laquida Landford, the lead visionary of the AfroVillage movement in Portland. You can follow the project on Facebook at AfricanVillage PDX project or go to her website, www.afrovillagepdx.org where you can find out more about the project and how to donate. Thank you for joining us. [MUSIC]