

## Oral history interview with James Nugent conducted by Ruth Belay

21 February 2020

00:00:01

**Ruth Belay**

Thank you so much for sitting down with us. I'm excited for this interview, I see you have a lot of pictures! If you could please state your name and the year that you graduated from U of T.

00:00:10

**James Nugent**

Okay so, my name is James Nugent and I was at UTSC, so University of Toronto Scarborough College, and I started in 2001 and graduated 200- When did I graduate? I was there for a five-year program so, one, two, three- I guess it would have been 2007? [quietly counts to himself] No – six. 2006. Yup. 2006.

00:00:44

**Ruth**

Tell me a little bit about your life before coming to U of T.

00:00:48

**James**

Ah, my life before U of T... Well I guess most relevant to kind of what we're going to be talking most about- you know the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a lot of political mobilization and as I was in my upper years of high school we had things going- basically what was called the anti-globalization movement was happening and so you had the Battle of Seattle, which I think was 1999, so Naomi Klein's *No Logo* book and sort of the convergence, at least in Seattle to the sort of environmental movement and labour movements and- which of course build on a longer history but, you know at the end of the cold war you have this opening up "okay what the world going to be like?" and so people were trying to define that. You know? What was the new post-cold war world going to be? And what we were really begin told of course is that there is going to be a world of free-trade and multi-national corporations that of course have the upper hand and defining that vision and so there was a surge of sort of popular protest and demonstration to try to define new terms that the world could be organized around and lived through. And so after those – I was caught- when I was sort of in my last year of high school, we had the Free Trade-agreement of the Americas was being negotiated in Quebec City and I went to that demonstration and it was – literally there was this- Quebec was this forces and it was surrounded by thousands and thousands of police officers running down the street shooting tear gas canisters at demonstrators like right- like meters from me and so I was like, "wow, what's happening here" and I was of course taking my world issues courses and learning about what was happening a bit more on a global scale. So that was coming out of high school.

And then on my very first day of classes in 2001, September 11 2001 was my first day of international relations and on my way to class, I stopped in at the students center, student life center coming off residence at

Scarborough, and watched as the you know as the second airplane - the aftermath, the first airplane hit the world trade organization building and then then the second – or the towers and then the second plane hitting the tower, and so then I go to my international relationships course and that was sort of the start of my university career. So and of course everything that happened after that, really led into some of the mobilization that we had to get involved in because the United States began very quickly to mobilize war and retaliatory sort-of vengeance against what he was calling “terrorists” and the discussion as very quickly shifting away from a discussion about how do we- what kind of a world we want in a post-cold war time to a new rhetoric around terrorism and anti-terrorism and so on and so forth and ‘routing out all evil’ and the things that came out of that discussions with George Bush and others articulating that, so. So that was sort of the beginnings of my undergrad and like I said, that quickly moved into the drum beating towards war, that the United States was doing, and the invasion of Afghanistan and soon enough, discussions about and movement towards invading Iraq and so, which happened later in I think, I guess a year later I mean the time lines’ a bit fuzzy but I think- and based on these photos- I guess it was yeah, a year later. So, yeah.

So that's what kind of brought us into action, I mean it was just impossible almost not to be engaged with what was happening in the world at the time, especially given my group of friends- you know I was in the international development studies program at Scarborough College and it really attracts a really wide range of students in terms of motivations for why they're there, but they are all very conscience about the state of the world and trying to make the world a better place and so it was a really great space for having discussions about what was happening and for ultimately starting to do some mobilization to- in our case, one of the things we were really focused on was preventing Canada from entering the Iraq War, and I guess that was 2002? I believe? And 2002-2003, and there, we did lots of other mobilization too around, on campus, around fair-trade, the fair-trade movement, trying to get Scarborough College to adopt fair-trade policy and to sell fair-trade coffee and another items, which you know, I went back years later and realized that they now do sell fair-trade coffee, but it was a struggle at that time to even become aware of what it was and so we had different mobilizations around that. And then, we also had- some of the women were leading a feminist revival or movement on campus, and they called it Grrl Fest, so G-R-R-L Fest, so Girl Fest and that was another mobilization that was happening. So there was quite a lot it seemed – a lot of, any spare time that I had was going into these types of mobilization at Scarborough.

00:07:19

**Ruth**

I guess maybe, backtracking a little bit

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**James**

Sorry [laughs] there's everything!

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**Ruth**

It's okay [laughs], what were some of your impressions of- I guess the student networks on campus?

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**James**

Yeah, um [sighs]. I mean being at Scarborough- yeah I mean there was a lot of discussions at the time about – I think we were part of the downtown student union- or there was discussions about how to – to what extent we should be independent from the student union perspective which was different stuff than- we were always trying to get them, you know to support what we were doing but there were those discussions. And, but there was quite a separation I think, and there probably still is, between the groups at Scarborough College and downtown. When I was at some point that it might have even been my first year- first or second year that the Canadian Federation of Students did their organizing drive so I remember them coming to Scarborough College, and I guess part of the idea there would have been to better unite some of the student groups. I don't – you know I don't think it really did anything practically in terms of joining us with groups downtown. It probably led to some lobbying at the provincial and federal levels, but in terms of the networks which was your question, yeah I'm just trying to think whether- you know... I mean in terms of the groups- Scarborough at the time, I mean it was growing – I forget the number of students but anywhere from four to six thousand students. But it was, it was still a sort of contained campus smaller, like a mini or smaller university and so you knew everybody- like you knew all of the groups. It was not hard in terms of trying to get a hold of your student government or to find other student leaders like it was pretty, it was pretty easy to do that actually so, this one thing I actually kind of liked about Scarborough- I mean there are a lot of things. I love Scarborough, I'm a big fan of Scarborough College, I've always been, partly because my best friends were made there, but it was also a really- it was good for a student networking within Scarborough. Yeah.

00:09:59

**Ruth**

And I guess, as a result of 9/11, a lot of the orientation of student mobilization had shifted, to be focused more on reacting to political states. So how did some of these initial initiatives come about?

00:10:19

**James**

Yeah. So, we had a group – it was called RESA, Resources for Environmental and Social Action. And so, that group was started by previous international development students. And it was separate from the International Development Studies Students Association which was a- the RESA it was called, Resource for Environmental and Social Action -it was more of a political body whereas the IDSSA was more about – featured a bit more in the academic side of things in terms of meeting

your professors and maybe having formal talk or seminars or things like this, or just for as a group- they held the potlucks that brought us all together. Which was important cause that helped us come together culturally in a lot of ways. But RESA was really a political organization focusing on trying to become aware of issues and take political action. And so we met- I think it was every week, I'd have to go back to my notes, but we met very regularly. And we talked about what was going on and we created action plans and carried out events on campus and ultimately, also off campus in terms of mobilizing contingents to go to the anti-Iraq War demonstrations that swept across Canada.

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**Ruth**

And what were some of the events that you guys planned as an organization?

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**James**

Yeah so, as part of RESA we organized, like I said, we organized the fair-trade, it was sort of a campaign I think we called it, and so we did things like- you know, dress up in coffee bean sacks and try to give students information about what fair-trade is. We tried to lobby the Food and Services at the University of Toronto Scarborough to get them to adopt fair-trade purchasing policy. And we also tried to get them to question their relationship and overturn their relationship with Tim Hortons which refused to sell fair-trade. At the time the University was in a contract with Aramark and so that was a big problem, stumbling block for us because they said we have this contract we can't do anything about it in terms of say selling fair-trade coffee. I think since then, U of T has taken their food services in house which has allowed them I think more flexibility in terms of them being able to do the fair-trade thing. And so, I'm sure there was their own logic for doing that but we were definitely pushing them to try and adopt fair-trade. So, that was one thing the fair-trade campaign.

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**Ruth**

Aramark is still there.

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**James**

Aramark is still there? Okay. Yeah. I know downtown I think they have taken theirs through services in house so- but they do sell fair-trade there now. Cause I was in Scarborough and I saw it being sold there so who knows? Maybe someone eventually listen to us or some other group. The other things we did, we- like I said, we mobilized several buses to go down town to the anti-Iraq War demonstrations, we had a teach-in in the Meeting Place and you can see that in some of the pictures where we're have - we made buttons and we made you know peace signs and probably... a sign for peace, we had buttons, peace buttons, yeah really all sorts of things and I can't remember whether we went to classrooms to try to promote mobilization, that was a common practice. I imagine we did but I can't actually specifically remember that. A lot of I guess

emailing and postering and that type of thing. And then the other major action- or campaign – or festival was the GRRL Fest which was feminist festival and that was- the ideas around there was to really just bring awareness to feminist ideas and political movements and to challenge patriarchy and so, there was a series of – again events in the Meeting Place, a series of workshops, everything from just different workshops feminist workshops, and then I think there was also some cultural events as well. Like coffee houses and things like that. I think one of the pictures from that- so. So yeah, so it, that was all happening at the same time, so it was a real vibrant- you can see some poster making there in the Meeting Place. And there was a lot of stuff around sexual health, and sexual expression and you got to remember too, this is all happening before any talk really in a formal sense around like recognizing gender identity, recognizing gender expression as human rights- like that was not even at the time that was not even being really discussed in the mainstream kind of political discourse and so it was really an awakening for a lot of people including myself, to feminist theory, feminist politics, around issues of trans rights, LGBTQ rights, and there wasn't – Scarborough didn't have as strong of an LGBTQ movement as perhaps might have been downtown, but it was definitely there and it was definitely doing its work and the people that were doing that worked really hard on those things. So, it also dovetailed some of the LGBTQ stuff as well so. Yeah.

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**Ruth**

Were there other student organizations that you participated in?

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**James**

Um, yeah so, RESA and IDSSA were the two main organizations that I was involved in. some of our colleagues, some of my peers got involved, one or two, in the student union. And I think there was also – you know, I wasn't involved in it but there was also like, I forget the name, they had like a dance festival and it was – a cultural festival- different types of dancing-

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**Ruth**

Mosaic?

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**James**

Mosaic, yes. I know it's probably still happening. But a couple of people did that and they had a fashion show too, and there was some talk about us doing sort of like a counter-cultural fashion pieces in that- sort of like , you know, dressing up in like a coffee bag to promote- or coffee sack to promote fair-trade- I don't know if we ever did it. We did dress up in a coffee sack but I don't think it was for the fashion show. Yeah so those are the main things. I mean I was involved in like volleyball and choir and stuff but that wasn't really political stuff so. Yeah.

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**Ruth**

And I guess like, when you went downtown to these different events, like busing in all these different students, what was the atmosphere like in those spaces?

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**James**

Yeah, I mean it was incredibly festive actually- in one way, it was serious in that like we were never lost in just how serious of an event and threat war is to the world and so, the weight of war was in Canada joining a war was very real and so that was definitely lingering, but at the same time it was – You know, we really came together and we had – it was a really intense moment- just a lot of political discussion and getting people to talk about global politics, feminist politics, and it was a really coming together of students and yeah- I thought it was festive in a certain sense in terms of like making anti-war posters and drumming- you know getting your drum ready and making your drum. Things like that so it was – I remember it as a really dynamic, engaging time. Yeah. Which was both heavy in conversation in the weight of the situation, but also a sort of – I don't want to say festive because I think that lightens it a bit too much but it was – it was very vibrant, very vibrant and culturally rich time I think for all of us.

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**Ruth**

So how did student organizing kind of shape your trajectory and the trajectory of your classmates?

00:19:43

**James**

Yeah, you know its interesting looking back at these photos- I was asking the same thing you know “where did all these people end up?” and I know some of them, but I don't know all of them. And so, yeah I really do wonder where everybody ended up, but I know a good amount of them and I mean, this is a- really, a lot of these students are really brilliant people and they all went on to do really amazing things.

In terms of my own trajectory, I mean I continue to be involved in student life and student activism, but I eventually also when I went on to do my- well, you know I just continued to do various environmental activism too, around climate change, so following my undergrad, I was involved in helping to set up the Toronto Climate Campaign which was a climate justice group in 200- was it 2007? 2008? Around there. During the wave of climate mobilization that sort of adds- it was becoming apparent that Canada was not meeting its Kyoto targets. And I was also ultimately involved in the labor politics, student union- for contract workers teaching, teachers, contract teachers unions on campus and taking and in various leadership roles in that the union mobilization that we had, and the union work that we had to, here at U of T. I ended up coming to U of T [St. George campus] for my masters.

And then in addition to that, ultimately my dissertation work was participatory community-based work and so I was involved in doing community organizing to pressure and ultimately negotiate- set up negotiations with the government to establish community benefit agreements linked to infrastructure projects, public infrastructure projects in Ontario and in Toronto and the GTA. Which had the aim of linking and ensuring that when we build public transit we also achieved social policy objectives, like employment equity and like other social policy objectives such as housing or environmental policies and things like this so.

So, you know it continued ultimately outside of the campus into other realms although you know I think it's important, I think with the anti-Iraq War stuff it was never really contained to Scarborough. I do remember feeling that, you know it was at times difficult to figure out how to do community work in Scarborough and there was a feeling "like a lot of stuff's happening downtown," but eventually there was some students that also got involved in trying to understand more about the refugees that were living in motels along Kingston Road. And so there started to be a turn towards that type of work and I can't actually remember where that went or how it went but that was something that I know students were trying to find a way to become more aware of that because that was in our backyard. And there as always this sense that Scarborough University- Scarborough College as a university was kind of like a bubble and we were aware that Scarborough was a marginalized area of Toronto in a lot of ways, in terms of demographics and in terms of sort of socio-economic opportunities and systematic injustices in that regard. In terms of services- you know just in terms of – you know when you think of public services or transport or whatever have you- we also knew we had- we started to learn you know that there were a lot of refugees living along Kingston Road, and so trying to think about well how can we do some solidarity work with those communities. And like I said, I was not involved in that, I do know that there was discussions about it and I'm not sure where that ended up going so. But I – one of the things that I am aware of now, is that there is a- there's like a center for community partnerships at Scarborough and that didn't exist when we were there, right? I think its really important noting that because there was no official support from the University for this type of work so- that I can remember. And if there was I think we would have been aware of it. Because of the types of students we were and the work that we were doing and so this idea of service learning and community – building community partnerships and that type of thing, yeah it was not it wasn't really there. I mean we did have a – one course in our program where you could volunteer with, with an organization and I took that course and I ended up coming downtown to volunteer with Oxfam. I think that was an IDS-C10 or something? That was the course code, I think. I can't remember but it- so I mean it was there, that was obviously a service learning course, but there wasn't like a center or really much beyond the fact that the course existed in the course calendar, but I sought it out and kind of "oh well what's this

course," it wasn't like it was being promoted in any sort of way. So, I think that's fantastic, that there's potentially its- I do have a concern with that in that I wonder how political it can be- you know? And I wonder whether the absence of that official support for community partnerships and service learning – its liberating in the sense that there's no one telling you how to do community work- so you can come up with very political manifestations of it as we did. But then again, maybe that center can also promote- maybe people will use that, those services and that space, to actually promote some political work- I don't know it's an open question for me- what happens when there's kind of an official recognition of this need to get more engaged in your community, under what conditions and in what form does that support solidarity, or support, or service-learning take? is a question- I think it's open ended, but...

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**Ruth**

Yeah definitely. I'm actually doing my last year's thesis on- particularly looking at UTSC and their partnership development.

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**James**

Okay, yeah. So yeah you know it's- it is important to recognize that it was not there when I went through and there was definitely an appetite for it and I think our program- the IDS program, I'm pretty sure it's been supportive- I know its been supportive of the development of that community partnership- Center for Community Partnerships in that some of the staff have gone on to work there and lead it. And its not a coincidence because one of the things that we were pushing for as students, and this was an important struggle within our program that really came, I think more from the students than from anyone else, we were actually pushing to have – because we were in the co-op program so we had to have placements we had to go on into and traditionally international placements into the global south, majority world, developing countries, third world (however you want to define it), but we were saying, "why can't- we've got huge issues of poverty and colonization here and why can't we do placements in our own backyard? working with Indigenous people and stuff." And again, this was all happening before there was any– like there wasn't this, the current push right now to have like Indigenization strategies and working Indigenous partnerships- more official partnerships with Indigenous peoples and hiring Indigenous scholars and things like that, like that did not exist at the time. And in fact, we were as students pushing to try to reframe what international development studies was, and trying to have that recognition that it's something you can do in your own backyard. And so, I think that the support that the IDS program has given to the rise of the community partnership- the Center for Community Partnerships, I think was partly because they were pushed by students to make that happen so.

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**Ruth**

Yeah definitely. And there was a lot of students who were actively doing this work even before U of T was formally supporting them. Yeah.

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**James**

That's right.

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**Ruth**

Yeah, especially through the Imani Academic Mentorship Program and other initiatives.

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**James**

Yeah. And some of the students did. I'm forgetting now the name of the literacy program that they- you work up north-

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**Ruth**

Oh, Frontier College?

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**James**

Yeah Frontier College. So, a lot of – some of my peers were also involved in that. That work so. Yeah.

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**Ruth**

Could you tell me a little bit more about your thesis?

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**James**

My honors thesis?

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**Ruth**

Yeah. Oh no, not your honors thesis, I guess your master's thesis?

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**James**

Yeah. So, I mean I will just quickly note that my honors thesis was looking at the tension between poverty and global biodiversity goals. And so, I was working with a global biodiversity conservation authority in south east Africa, in Malawi, and working with essentially really poor farmers who were cutting down the rainforest to feed themselves. And so that was my honors thesis and they were enmeshed in this colonial history of the states and everything else and the state and forestry departments but that was my honors project.

My master's thesis was on climate change policy in Canada and some of the history and formation of climate change policy, particularly coming out of the – through the 1990's and going into the early 2000's. And so I covered that period and also looked at the role of the labor movement in helping shape these discussions around the environment and the economy, and what climate change will mean. And how this transition – what the transition should be away from a fossil fuel economy and how to frame that and how it should be framed. Because again at that time,

corporations did not embrace climate change policy at all. And so, it was really – they were fighting tooth and nail to prevent the ratification and implementation of Kyoto. So, this idea that all corporations now have corporate social responsibility around climate change- like that did not exist. And so, it was – they were fighting it every step of the way. Until of course Canada did formally adopt Kyoto and the Liberals were in power and they thought well maybe – might as well do something about it because it looks like it's here to stay- but ultimately, they saw well no the Liberals are going to go out of power seeing Harper and the Conservatives were going to come in so they took another step against it but- position against it. So I was looking at that transition but in particular the role of the labor movement in helping to define what that relationship is between the environment and the economy, and in the words, the ideas and concepts of the labor movement around it a just transition. So, essentially climate justice.

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**Ruth**

You're doing your PhD? or-

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**James**

I finished, yeah.

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**Ruth**

Okay so your PhD as well then-

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**James**

Well the PhD topic was really looking at how do people produce cities? How do you- in their own image- in the image that they want, in the vision that they want. And how do they develop those visions and how do they try to bring about those visions in creating their city that they live in? And so, I was looking at how do social movements- how do people become part of social movements? And how do those social movements come to frame the debates around what a city should be? And ultimately actually, produce in a sort of I guess more material sense, what a city actually is? And so we were looking we did- there was four years of field work because essentially I followed- I helped, you know, establish and develop a community- labor community environmental coalition that was trying to convert a former industrial site in Toronto in a priority neighborhood in Toronto's north-west, western part area of Toronto into a site for green manufacturing, or green industry, or somehow create green jobs on this former large former industrial site. And so, we tried to do that for a couple of years. And didn't have much luck, frankly. And then the government announced it would be using that site as a part of the light rail transit project on Eglinton. So we said well look, this project is going to go through like a dozen different priority neighborhoods- which is now called neighborhood improvement areas, but basically poor racialized communities and we're like how can those community members get jobs and training and benefits from this infrastructure project? Because they

will certainly face some of the consequences of gentrification as this project finishes up and land prices go up but also just on its own terms is that the benefits in producing a city and in creating jobs and such should be equitably distributed. Yeah, and there was also – and how did we do that how do we reach equity objectives and social policy goals, but also how do we do this in an environmental way, in a green way and build communities and sustainable communities? And so, there was a lot of talk around what does that look like when we build a transit project and transit stations and how do we do more than just build transit? How do we build community?

So, I was, so more theoretically I was looking at this issue of how to – how do social movements shape the production of urban space? And mediate and regulate and challenge the imperatives of capital in shaping space in its image, in its desire to accumulate capital and profits, and how do communities do it in their image? And how do they create a vision of that? So. But more practically, it was about this particular project and I was very much engaged in creating that community- labor community coalition, and ultimately pressuring the government to negotiate what we ended up calling community benefit agreement and to my surprise, you know they did open up negotiations and so we spent a couple years negotiating Ontario's first community benefit framework for the Eglinton light rail transit, the cross-town LRT project. We negotiated the first community benefits framework for that. It wasn't quite an agreement and it has some equity hiring targets, although it wasn't binding. We also did- the provincial government ended up passing some legislation which incorporated the term 'community benefits' into legislation for the first time. So yeah, it really shifted- and now its sort of common place that most big infrastructure projects will have a community benefits agreement and so ours was essentially the first one. There was one before it at Woodbine that – but then that project hadn't– and it ended, it didn't end up going through so we got a lot the ideas from that. But it was and of course it had been going on in the States and there was some experience in Canada around impact benefit agreements in more rural, northern and Indigenous communities so we were drawing on all of that stuff as well.

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**Ruth**

As a student and a researcher, I guess, its empowering to utilize our activism or our social interests in research and you've found very meaningful ways of supporting those causes through different efforts, whether its research or physically advocating for certain things, how important is that to activism? And to the student experience?

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**James**

How important is what- is that having that-

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**Ruth**

Having the space to kind of like connect what you are doing academically to your interests-

00:37:45

**James Nugent**

Yeah I think it's incredibly important- so when I got a chance to teach an urban studies course, and urban geography course, in my PhD, like I did a I taught it as – partially as a service learning course where students got involved in campus groups that were related in some ways to some of the issues. So we basically spent the first week brainstorming all of the problems that exist in a city and then I told the students, “okay go solve them and get involved in the groups on campus or if you can in an authentic, productive way get involved in a community group, but get involved in community and campus groups or do deputations, or however you and your group decide what should be done or whether something should be done,” you know that became part of the course and so – you know. I think based upon my experience going through the University of Toronto and as a student being involved in all of these groups for sure, that gave me partially the idea to run that course and I saw a real big need for service learning for integrating extracurricular or co-curricular work with curriculum and that wasn't done when I went through and so- I mean a lot of like myself and a lot of my peers, I mean we were the top achieving students. We were the students with the highest grades and stuff so we had a lot of academic pressures, but we still saw the importance of doing all of this activism and I have really wished that at the time there had been more support for us to integrate the two of them, partly just to lighten the load a little bit, because it was quite a lot- it was a tremendous amount of work we did and it was very stressful and I think it could have been done – a lot of what we had been doing, I mean I always tell my students now when I teach that 60 percent of what I learned came from my peers outside of the classroom in getting involved in these things and having these discussions and you see these pictures of us in our dorm rooms or our houses at Scarborough and just having potlucks and talking about issues like – at least 60 percent of what I learned and some of that was bringing out ideas that we were talking about in class you know, like we were taking political science or ecology or whatever and we would bring that into the discussion too. But, yeah so it was – you had asked me a question earlier and I think this kind of speaks to that anyways about the importance of – well, yeah anyways. I think it can be important to have these academic spaces where students can- who maybe have a harder time finding this network- like the IDS program is – like these are all student leaders from across the country, and the world really, and so they were all were able to find each other, were able to build community and build a network starting in year one or two right? Whereas other students need more supports I think to create that network and I think that one of the things – and the IDSSA and other things that the program itself does a very good job. It had to- it had an orientation, it really helps us to find each other, to bond- to cement these relationships so that really helps with doing this type of student mobilization and

activism and reflection that we did together. But I think that other students could really benefit, could and can, benefit from having that institutional support. So I shouldn't say that there wasn't institutional support in the sense of – you know that was in the sense of bringing us together and supporting us to come together as a program, and as a small program, and that potlucks and to have – we were hearing from upper year students who were coming back from placement, we had orientation, we had some training around anti-oppression training in our third year before we went off to placements so, I shouldn't say that there wasn't any institutional support, at all, I mean at least in our case, in our program, it did bring us together. But there wasn't sort of support in finding community partners locally.

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**Ruth**

Now as I guess the faculty or an instructor yourself, have you seen like that shift- how has like student activism come out to you in the classroom settings? Like do you – is there a difference between the activism you guys were doing back then and now? Within your students?

00:42:36

**James**

Well that's a really good question, there's definitely a transition moment happening now, where the idea of community partnerships and community- you know, and service learning and experiential learning is top of the agenda in many ways, in the- for universities and even provincially there are policies now to promote experiential learning, you know from a particular business oriented way, but I think that that's – its also giving some institutional support for experiential learning programs and so on. But I think it's a really good question about you know what form does that take? And in terms of student groups? I do want to say this though- I think that – and this is just from my- it's just anecdotal- it's from my own experience in teaching students now for you know since 2009, so that's like 10 years. Students are under increasing financial pressures both because of rising tuition and student fees, which by the way I should mention that was part of our struggles at the time too- and I don't know how many petitions or you know issues- that came up a lot when I was at Scarborough. It was the times of increasing student fees and tuition so that has gone up quite a lot and so students are under a lot of financial pressure, the student loan systems being re-jigged which, you know- and so coupled with an increasingly, fragmented, casualized, contract gig economy, you know, that means that there's very limited stable good paying jobs for students when they graduate. And I have a very deep concern that these two financial constraints, pressure that students feel, so increasing tuition and fees coupled with a lack of jobs when they graduate, is steering students away from many kind of extracurricular involvement that doesn't help them in a very instrumental way. And I do see that happening, I do see those pressures, so that's a concern I have.

Students are also increasingly concerned about their marks, I mean, students have always been concerned about their marks, but there's huge pressure on instructors -by students around grades because students. Because there's not good jobs, students know they have to go to grad school and so that means they know they have to get certain grades and reference letters and stuff. And so there's- yeah it's, again I just think that students education is being looked at I much more instrumental way and I do have concern for the social sciences and humanities which officially from the provincial perspective is – from a provincial policy perspectives is not being supported with funding, and I think that when you have mounting student debt or you foresee mounting student debt, and you don't see a clear path to a job, you know, why would you ever take philosophy? Why would you ever take women and gender studies? Or why would you ever take international development even, or political science, or some of these things that I got a lot out of taking. Like I took all those courses and it was – it really shaped who I was and – as a human being it was incredibly important. So, I have a lot of concern for the arts in general, in this time and period. And I have a concern for student mobilization that isn't instrumental into building one's resume. The work we are doing, you know, except for a few jobs, you can't- you know- creating anti-war jobs doesn't necessarily jump out at most employers as a fantastic, you know, skill to have in their worker. Or doing union organizing is not something that employers generally like to see on a resume [laughs]. And so yeah, so where is the space for that type of- and the support for that type of political student work? Yeah.

00:47:18

**Ruth**

Yeah, and I guess touching on that theme as well, as student activism has also like transitioned to connect with the digital space as well. How have you seen that impacting the way mobilization occurs?

00:47:34

**James**

Well, it's a really good question and I don't know- like it's worth pointing out that when we were going through at this time period that I'm talking about in undergrad from 2001-2006/2007, like that period was the birth of social media, but we didn't have Facebook, right? We didn't have- we had MSN messenger, no one had cellphones. You know. We had MSN messenger, and so people were connecting a little bit through that, but it was really still- and so I don't know, maybe its easier now to actually do outreach and connect people. Like we had to do it the old-fashioned way of actually going and talking with people. That's why you see the sit in, right? That- the Meeting Place there in Scarborough is where everybody crosses over from different disciplines between their courses- especially before all of the expansion happened, and so it was a really busy place and so we had to physically get in touch with people and attracted them with buttons, and posters, and all these gimmicks. There wasn't social media- that was not a thing at all. I mean it was- we had MSN messenger, but not even everyone used that and it as sort of a new

thing so. Yeah, so I don't know now- like I don't know I'm an old man [laughs] I don't know how the youth these days connect to each other. Obviously, when I did some of my union work, you know, at U of T we were using social media and it was actually a very important tool for us to get involved, get in touch with our members in our union in unofficial ways, because which I think is worth pointing out- social media was very useful for us to create a collective outside of our official channels of our union which was largely – but narrowly the leadership was narrowly against – narrowly I mean just in terms of the number of votes, but we didn't have official control of union communications and so we had to kind of get in touch with people who wanted to push a bit harder than our official leadership did and so we did that through social media to connect with one another. But that was after- that was like 2009 or something. So yeah, that was important for sure.

00:49:57

**Ruth**

And then I guess touching back to the issues, like a lot of these issues are re-occurrent [sic] whether its anti-globalization or –

00:50:07

**James**

Climate change, climate justice, yup, sure.

00:50:08

**Ruth**

Climate change, student fees, or police brutality and violence-

00:50:12

**James**

Even war you know like, you know with what happened with a near war happening -breaking out with Iran recently, all these issues. Yeah.

00:50:22

**Ruth**

So how do you see that like I guess, student movements now or movements in general are linking back to these older movements? – or-

00:50:32

**James**

That's a really good question. You know when I think about- I think that that's a really- critical thing, right? Is how do you pass on this legacy, how do you pass on the work? We inherited resources from our mental, social action. The reason why we were able to kind of take that on is cause there was some carry over between the upper year students in our program and the IDS program who had started that organization and we looked up to them, of course, when we came in in first year and we got involved with it, and they were leaving it and then there was this mentorship and then we kind of took it over- took the leadership over when they went on placement and when they started to get more busy with their upper year and honors stuff, so we were doing it when they left ultimately. So yeah that mentorship happened because we were in a small program, we knew each other, we had these cultural events in terms of the potlucks and these program events that brought us together,

so we knew each other well, and that was really important. But then you know, I think about how did- when we left, how do we pass it on- or did we do that right? Or well enough? And I think for a few years, GRRL Fest continued, so from what I hear, so maybe that did get passed on and I'm not sure if RESA continued or not. I think it did for a couple of years, but yeah that's always a concern with student groups, right? How do you build that leadership- its interesting, I'm at Waterloo now. I'm a faculty member at Waterloo and there – because they have coop- so much people are in coop, they truly work on a tri-semester basis and so all student groups have to get new leaders every semester. So, every semester they have elections for new leaders which- in one hand is a big challenge for them because it means there is this constant turnover of leadership, and having to re-organize the books and all of this other stuff. And sign things over, but on the other hand, every semester, you have leadership training. And so, it actually is an opportunity for developing and cultivating leadership. So, I kind of like that model. But yeah it's a challenge- passing on that legacy and so maybe that's one reason this project is important, I guess down the road.

But you know, you also see images both in pop culture and documentaries about the previous student movement and that wasn't lost on us, I think, entirely. That we knew that there is this history of student mobilization and that– And so yeah, we were – I'm not sure how plugged in to that history we were but we knew that universities are places for political activism, and I think for some of us we expected that and found it when we went there.

00:53:32

**Ruth**

Yeah, definitely. And even just today seeing all the teachers [2020 Ontario teachers' strike] walk through and their supporters, and to have that proximity to spaces- [inaudible].

0:53:41

**James**

You know- and I'm glad you brought that up because it actually jogged my memory because, you have to remember that I was in high school during the last time the teachers were on strike under Mike Harris. It was in 1997 or something like this. And so that was a very important political time for me because, I was on student council at the time and I organized what I called a forum for education or education forum and I actually- this was in the midst of all these strikes that were happening in the late 1990's when Mike Harris and the conservative government was in power. I organized a townhall, a community townhall meeting at our school and brought in – it was a school event that brought in all of the local members of provincial parliament, the union representatives of the teachers union, and maybe some other groups, education groups, I don't know. Obviously, the school itself had to or did remain kind of neutral in the whole thing, but I organized this forum and students all went to actually hear from the government and from the teachers' unions exactly what

these issues were about. So that was, I mean that was grade eleven or something that I'm organizing that. And so, and I remember getting censored by my principle because I was writing a newsletter, a school newsletter, and I was critical of the Mike Harris government and he censored someone the words, I used in that letter. But yeah, so it was, there was a longer history actually when I think about it, of organizing and mobilization at least in my own life. So. But yeah, the teachers' strike was happening then, its happening now so, hopefully it won't happen again. But yeah.

So, these issues- and this whole generation would have gone through those teacher strikes when they were in high school. Yeah, I'm wondering how that would have affected people. But yeah, I mean the teachers strikes, the whole anti-globalization movement was – it really shouldn't be underestimated, at least maybe – you know its hard to separate- maybe I was just coming into more political awareness at the time and what not but there seemed to be quite a lot of momentum around challenging the existing kind of social order. Again, that was brought to a pretty abrupt halt after 9/11, and then it became a more defensive struggle against going to war and what not. So, you had this movement after the late – in the 1990s, the late 1990s and going into the 2000's of this- it was really sort of characterizes a more offensive struggle in that we are articulating the vision of the world that we want and are trying to – I mean it was defensive in that there are all these free-trade agreements that are being negotiated without any kind of public engagement or participation, but anyways. So yeah I don't know. And then, but definitely then after 9/11 it became this you know your just fighting going to war, you're fighting xenophobia. Like I remember in that semester, first semester of my undergrad, after 911, hearing about mosques in, I don't know if it was Quebec, but definitely in Canada, being fire-bombed. Might have been Ontario or Quebec. Might have been Ontario, actually. They were set on fire or fire-bombed and so that was the context of my first semester, right? And unfortunately, that continued for the rest- I mean, it still to this day, you know. That xenophobia, islamophobia in particular. So, Yeah.

00:57:54

**Ruth**

Yes. Some of these themes carry through and they really cement future articulations of the struggle, right?

00:58:01

**James**

Well yeah, and I'm just reading the- some of the slogans here on this- at this GRRL Fest, you really see the interlinking of the anti-war movement and the feminist movement – I'm just reading here "riots not diets," "boobs not bombs" and you know- and the fact that- these were sort of happening at the same time you know. It's really a lot of stuff on anti-racism and things like this. Yeah it was a really dynamic time. It really was. I mean it still is- but. Yeah.

00:058:35

**Ruth**

Is there anything else you would like to add?

00:58:37

**James**

Well, we're not supposed to name names, but I do want to say that, you know like, there were some student leaders that you always kind of looked up to, you know? And one of them that was, that made me aware that you were doing this project and, yeah I think, you know it gets to this issue of the continuity between student groups and you know when you come on campus and you sort of see someone taking up a megaphone and they are articulate and they seem to be talking about social justice and they are doing it in an articulate, confident way, that gives you motivation to pick up a megaphone yourself [laughs], right? And to learn the issues and to pick up a megaphone and try to start petitions and things like this. So yeah, so I don't know if it was when we came downtown that we would see those people or when I came here, I don't even know how I got exposed to some of those folks. But, I didn't know them personally but you know you end up looking up to them, so there's some continuity that way. And like I said even, the senior students in my own program and things like that, but. Yeah, I don't know if I have anything else to add, I mean I was at U of T you know from 2001 to 2018, with two years of break, one for coop and one in between my masters and undergrad. Yeah, it's an extremely conservative establishment, and... But there is some really dynamic student activism happening and obviously in more recent years with Black Lives Matter being on campus and the BDS [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions] movement here, and things like that like it's nice to see that there's still a very vibrant student life, student campus here. It's very important. Like I said it's something I worry about – that student politics is going to take a back burner to more instrumental approach to learning, because I can't emphasize enough that yeah at least 60% of my learning came through my peers and the student activism that I was involved in.

01:01:05

**Ruth**

Yeah. Definitely connecting with people on campus, really, it's formative to the relationships you keep and-

01:01:13

**James**

The relationships, but also just what you are getting out of your learning. You know? Like if you have people to talk to about this and you can kind of make it meaningful in your extra-curricular work, and vice versa, it just brings more meaning to your studying and brings more motivation to your studying and what you are doing. It raises the stakes of learning. It raises the stakes of learning, and so – and in that sense I am very hopeful that this movement of experiential learning and community partnerships and stuff- like I see openings for that, even my own self as a faculty member now, I- it was very easy to get institutional support to do some service-based learning and community-based learning and, you know I'm going

to do that through my own lens and framework that I have developed and I've developed and I've grown out of -or grown through. So its nice in that sense that there is that institutional support and maybe it will create some opportunities for people like myself to be able to do it from the positionality, or the lens or the framework, that I teach from. Right? And that I draw inspiration from and draw academically from. So, yeah so I think it's a hopeful time actually, as much as I do think I am concerned about yeah the instrumental approach to learning. I wonder and I hope that the emphasis on experiential learning and service-based learning will create some opportunities. On the other hand, I am very concerned that it could also just be diminished or devolved or collapsed into volunteerism, and I think that would be a huge mistake and could actually set us back if it does go that way.

01:03:02

**Ruth**

Okay well thank you so much-

01:03:04

**James**

Yeah, thank you! Thank you for doing this and spending the time to interview us and others on campus and at least letting us, I mean, share a little small- some small tidbits and perspectives from UTSC and Scarborough College. So, thank you very much.

01:03:22

**Ruth**

Thank you I think this project is so pivotal and is like- it's really, like informed the way that I look at my own experience and the experiences of the younger students that I know, so.

01:03:33

**James**

Yeah, and I mean, the other thing that – I mean Scarborough is so different than downtown, right? I can sort of more characterize it as a more working-class college in the sense that students are literally more students work and have full time jobs- the demographics are different. Like I was the only white guy in most of my classes- which coming from a rural white town, that really shaped- I was like, "okay wow this is the city," right? And just learning about all this- about different cultures and different- it was really great and – and I've taught at Scarborough and I've taught downtown and you can't- I mean there's a lot of overlap in students are students, but there is different experiences and I think at Scarborough – and even just some of the politics that happen there you know- like some of the inter- it's a very global, internationalized student body. Their first of second-generation immigrants and a lot of the politics that happen globally come into your classroom. I remember being in classrooms at Scarborough and there being fights breaking out by different groups that represented- different nationalities and stuff, or ethnicities based upon a war that was going on, on a conflict that was going on half way across the world, so. That was breaking- those fights were breaking out in class, right? Which had nothing to do with

Canadian-I shouldn't say nothing to do with Canadian politics, but weren't based in Canadian politics- these were things happening elsewhere. So, its interesting the differences of these- I mean you saw that too on campus too, you know recently with the protester in Hong Kong and China and this type of thing. I mean in Scarborough around there was Tamil groups and other groups from Sri Lanka- I can't remember all the different groups names- I don't want to say who was doing what, but that's another piece to all of this- is that me looking at these photos, like there's a lot of us were kind of white students, not all of us, but we're coming from different particular kind of demographics and there was a variety, I shouldn't underestimate that. I also wonder like what does student activism mean for people that are engaged in global struggles, global in the sense of international- things that are happening internationally. And that's something I think that, I think with a project like this that you are doing, I wouldn't want to – I would encourage you to kind of scratch the surface a bit and try to dig into that, because those might be groups that are less connected to the people you are talking to and the people I know, but they are influential in ways. I mean some of the leaders in our trade union, for example when I was involved in CUPE 3902, had become activists in the struggles that they were involved in overseas. Right? And so, they brought that activism and the tactics and strategies and stuff with them into our trade union. And the same goes, I think, for other student politics, so. Yeah. Its just another perspective on this that I think is probably worth investigating too.

01:06:47

**Ruth**

Definitely. Yeah, we've like tried to include international students, but not all of them have necessarily engaged with politics abroad to an extensive level. Like, I think yeah-

01:07:03

**James**

It's hard just to even find people, right? Cause you know you're snowballing to try to find participants for a study like this. Like I don't have any direct contact with you know Chinese activists or activists from Hong Kong- I have a couple now again through my union I met. Or other struggles. Like in my class I have this student who's from India and she was telling me about all of the amazing activism going on in India. And she's like, "as soon as I get back home, I'm going to be in a picket because of some of the feminist struggles happening there." So, it's easy for us who are involved in student activism to forget that students are- especially at U of T, I mean you have international students and their involved in struggles- just because they might not be involved in the stuff that you're doing or the stuff on campus, they might still be involved in a struggle or being at least connected to what's happening emotionally and politically elsewhere, right? And so that's something I've come to appreciate more as I'm engaging more with my own students coming- and just seeing, you know. Taking a bird's eye view of what's happening. So yeah. That's just

another piece. I wouldn't want that to get left you of the discussion of student activism.

Good thank you very much.

01:08:26

**Ruth**

Thank you.